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What She Didn't Know—Hurt Her

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BLONDE AND BEAUTIFUL

RICHARD FOSTER

Author of
"The Girl From Easy Street"

"Beautiful girls, bright lights and gangland guns highlight this not-to-be-missed suspense thriller."
REAL MAGAZINE

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SHE HAD HIS NUMBER!

Ciro Blake knew from hard experience that the Las Vegas mob wasn't going to come running just because the Crime Commission issued an invitation.

Somebody had to go into Hell City, knock some tough heads together, dodge some swift-flying lead, romance some information-loaded gangland girls—and be ready to dish it out just a little faster than he took it.

Ciro knew his job. But he didn't know Valda. Maybe no man ever would, yet Ciro came closest during a turbulent night when death lurked beyond a bedroom door!

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A SUSPENSE NOVEL

BLONDE AND BEAUTIFUL

RICHARD FOSTER

Author of "The Girl From Easy Street"

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CHAPTER 1

The big TWA plane set down on McCarran Field. The landing was as smooth as a chorus girl's shoulder. I got out of the plane and went into the terminal to wait for my luggage. According to the big clock we were on time. It was just noon. This was Las Vegas, Nevada, the "desert playland" where "the weather perks you up" in "the free and easy atmosphere of the Old West." Actually there wasn't anything free about it and it wasn't always easy. There were a lot of other attractions not mentioned so prominently by the chamber of commerce. The slot machines that eat up the grocery money. The dice tables and roulette wheels that turn baby's new shoes into an old pair of scuffed sneakers. The fancy women, the grifters, the gamblers, and the big-time tough boys who drift wherever there's easy money.

My luggage arrived and I climbed into a cab.

"I want Senator Hennessey's house," I said. "You know where it is?"

"Big Joe's?" he said. "Everybody knows Big Joe's house. Over by Lake Mead." The gears clashed as he got under way. "He expectin' you?"

"He's expecting me," I said. It wasn't any of the driver's business, but I was willing to part with that much information.

The driver's eyes peered at me for a minute from the rear view mirror. "Big Joe's having a party this afternoon, that's why I asked. Meaning no offense, you don't look like the kind that shows up for his parties."

"What kind's that?" I asked.

"Loaded. And slick-looking. The dames with everything about to pop out of their dresses. The guys waiting for it to pop. But everything very polite, if you know what I mean."

I grinned at his description. "I know what you mean," I told him. Big Joe Hennessey was a former state senator, now retired. But he had a lot of money and he was still a big wheel in Nevada. And a few other places. I'd never met him, but I knew about him and I knew the type. His parties were probably made up of people who could match his bank account, those who could match or top him as a celebrity, and the kinds of gate-crashers who were in that sort of crowd.

"I figure you're different," the driver said. "The kind of guy who does his own popping. Maybe a working man, if you know what I mean."

"I've been called worse," I said.

"Of course, you could be some kind of traveling salesman . . ."

"It's possible," I admitted.

"Or," he went on, trying to pin it down a little, "maybe just a guy who's saved his dough and come out on his vacation to take a little flyer on the dice table."

"I've faded a buck or two in my time," I said.

He gave up then, turning his attention back to his driving. I grinned at the look of frustration on his face.

At last he pulled into a private driveway and rolled up to a ranch house that looked big enough to have the ranch inside. There were a lot of cars parked around the front, and I could see what the cabbie meant. They were all Cadillacs, Lincolns, or snappy little foreign jobs.

"Wait for me," I told the driver. I left my luggage in the cab and walked up to the front door. Just as I reached it, the door opened and a blonde stepped out. Score two for the cabbie. She did look as though her ample curves were straining to be free of her close-clinging dress.

She stopped short when she saw me. "Ooh," she said, "another man. Go right in, honey. I'll be back."

"Better not run," I told her, looking at her plunging neckline. "It might be dangerous."

She giggled and ran off toward the cars. I went on inside the house. There were maybe a dozen people in the first room, all with drinks in their hands. They were talking to each other and paid no attention to me.

A flunkey came along with a tray full of cocktails. He saw me standing there and veered over in my direction.

"Most of the guests are out by the swimming pool, sir," he said. "Cocktail, sir?"

"No, thanks," I said. "I don't like my whisky all mussed up like that."

"You'll find straight drinks in the game room, sir," he said.

"Okay," I said. "Is Senator Hennessey around?"

"I believe so, sir. Did you wish to see him?"

"That's the general idea," I said. "I'll be at the swimming pool." I went on into the next room, which turned out to be the game room. There was a small bar with a bartender back of it. I stopped on the way past.

"Canadian Club?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. Soda?"

"No, just the way it comes out of the bottle," I told him. "And don't spare the horses."

He took his hand away from the small glass and picked up an Old-Fashioned glass. He splashed it half full of whisky and pushed it toward me. I took it and continued my unguided tour. Four rooms later I found the patio, and just beyond it was the swimming pool.

There were fifty or more people around the pool. Most of them were in bathing suits—if you can say that a girl wearing a bikini is *in* a bathing suit.

There was only one trouble with the scenery. You take something like thirty girls, all of them beautiful, stick bikinis on them, and it's blinding. You can't see the trees for the forest. Out of self-defense, I looked around for something a little less exposed.

She had short blond hair brushed into a halo around her head. Blue eyes, the color of a summer sea. And features that would have made most movie stars look sick. She was wearing a light blue dress with a full skirt and a high neckline, but I was willing to bet on the figure it concealed. I edged over her way.

"Hello," I said.

She looked up. There was nothing but ice in the blue eyes. "Hello," she said.

That was all. She was being polite, but she wasn't handing out any invitations.

"We haven't met before, have we?" I asked.

"No," she said.

"An unfortunate situation," I said. "Don't you think it's time we corrected it?"

"Why?"

"I can think of several reasons," I said, "although maybe they shouldn't be mentioned until after we've met. I—"

"That brings us to an impasse, doesn't it?" she said coolly. "Why don't we leave it at that?"

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and made a point of watching someone doing a swan dive from the board at the other end of the pool. I took the hint temporarily, but she couldn't stop me from looking at her.

I was still sipping my Canadian Club and watching the blonde when I became aware that someone had stopped beside me. It was an effort, but I looked around. I saw a big man, maybe sixty years old. His face was weather-beaten and looked as if it might have been carved out of rock. His hair was white. He was at least four inches taller than me, which would put him at six feet four. He probably weighed two hundred and fifty. Not much of it was fat.

"I'm Big Joe Hennessey," he said. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yeah," I said. "I just flew in from Washington."

"You're Blake?"

"I'm Blake."

He chewed on it a minute. "I'll talk to you in about two minutes. Got to get rid of a guy first." He turned and looked around the pool. "Hey, Valda," he yelled.

I was in luck. It was the blonde in the blue dress who came over.

"Talk to him a minute," he grunted at her. He lumbered away.

I grinned at her. "You see," I said, "things have a way of taking care of themselves. Now we've been introduced."

"Have we?" she said.

"Only partly," I admitted. "He said your name was Valda. A very pretty name. What's the rest of it?"

"Isn't that enough?" she asked.

"Enough for me," I said. "Mine's Ciro."

She lifted her eyebrows. "The same as the night club in Hollywood?"

"The same," I said, "only not as noisy and the cover charge is less."

She wasn't amused. "How quaint," she said.

"Can I get you a drink?" I wanted to know.

"No, thank you."

The conversation was bogging down again. I let it and just looked. That began to get under her skin.

"Are you a friend of the senator's?" she asked.

"Never met him before," I said.

"Oh." She paused, but I outwaited her again. "Business?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Important business, I presume?" She managed a note of cold amusement, probably at the idea of my being a businessman.

"I'm thinking of going into politics," I said solemnly, "and he's going to show me how to kick somebody in the groin and make it look like I'm pinning a medal on him."

She knew I was telling her to mind her own business. For the first time I thought I saw some of the ice melting in her eyes, but maybe it was just wishful thinking. I hadn't even gotten a smile out of her, but she had something for me. I'd been around and usually I could take blondes or leave them alone, but this one had me breathing fast just from standing near her. That hadn't happened to me since I was a kid.

But the feeling soon got its growth stunted. Big Joe Hennessey came back.

"Thanks, Valda," he said. "Come on in the study with me, Blake."

I took a last look at the blonde and decided I was going to like it in Las Vegas. Then I turned and followed the senator into the house.

After walking through several rooms, we ended up in what he called the study. It was big enough to make an apartment for a family of five. He dropped into a chair back of the desk and looked up at me.

"Drink?" he said.

I lifted the glass of Canadian Club. There was still about an inch in it.

"Sorry to burst in on a party," I said, "but I was told to see you as soon as I arrived. I came straight from the airport."

"Got any identification?" he asked.

I took out my wallet and let him look at it.

"All right," he rumbled. "There's a reservation for you at the Playland Hotel. Check in. Then at two-thirty you're to go to the Silver Lode Club on Old Fremont. Know it?"

I nodded. I'd been in Las Vegas about a year before, and that was one of the few gambling clubs I did remember. "Ricci Menotti's club," I said.

"That's the one," he said gruffly. "Go in and play the dollar slot machine. As soon as you get a hit, take out your handkerchief and tie the silver dollars in it. Go to the bar and have a drink. If you're not contacted within a half hour, try it again."

"That's all?" I asked.

He nodded. "You know what you're looking for. That's all we have. After that you're on your own."

"No strings attached?"

His old eyes were shrewd as he looked up at me. "No strings. Results."

"No sacred cows?"

"No sacred cows. No reports. No orders. You can consult me unofficially any time you like, but you're strictly on your own. Wasn't that the way you wanted it?"

"That's the way I want it," I admitted.

"All right. You're wasting time, Blake."

I took the hint. I had some idea of going to look for the blonde again, but the senator left the study right on my heels. I had a feeling he didn't want me mingling with the guests. He was a good guy—I had it on the word of somebody who was straight—but he wasn't going to forget who was the hired hand.

I went out, climbed back into the cab, and told the cabbie where I wanted to go. Las Vegas wasn't so big, I thought, but what I ought to be able to find Valda again.

The Playland Hotel wasn't the Sands or the Last Frontier, but it was good enough. Eight dollars a day. The tab was on an expense account or I would have been in a motel.

I checked in and was taken up to my room. I flipped the boy a dollar, just to be sure he'd remember me, and he was on his way. I unpacked my suitcase and put everything away. Or almost everything. I buckled on the shoulder holster and slipped the .38 into it. My watch told me I had almost an hour before I was due at the Silver Lode, so I decided to check first on the only guess I had. I picked up the phone and gave the operator the number of the Las Vegas *Plain Dealer.*

"Jay Crowley," I told the girl who answered the phone. I thought the editor of the paper would remember me, though it was a year since I'd seen him.

"Hello," he said after a pause. He sounded the way he had the last time I talked to him—like a guy walking a tight wire.

"Ciro Blake," I said.

"Ciro," he shouted into the phone. There was real pleasure in his voice. "When did you get back to town? Where are you?" Then his voice began to sound worried again. "*Why* are you back in town?"

"Business at the old stand, more or less."

"The old stand is still here," he said dryly.

"So I heard," I said. "Maybe you can tell me something, Jay. Know anything about 'A Friend'?"

"You expect me to know anything about friends?" he asked bitterly. It wasn't exactly an accurate reaction; he had plenty of friends. But then, he did have even more enemies. "What's it all about? No, wait. Don't tell me now. Come on over to the office."

That meant he thought his phone was tapped. Things hadn't changed much in Las Vegas. His phone had been tapped the last time I was there. It also meant he didn't know anything about "A Friend."

"Later," I said. "I think I've got a date. You'll be in later?"

"All afternoon and most of the evening." He hesitated, then went on, picking his way carefully among the words. "I don't know what it's about, Ciro, but take it easy."

"Sure," I said. "I'm just going out to drop a few bucks in the palaces of sin. Don't tell me it's illegal to lose your money."

"No law against it, but some people might call what you're spending blood money."

"All money's blood money," I said. "You sweat blood to get it these days. I'll see you around, Jay."

"Sure," he said. "I'll keep the obituary column open."

A nice guy, but not exactly cheerful. He'd been butting his head against a stone wall so long he didn't know they had any other kind.

I left the hotel and went over to Old Fremont Street—the street of snake eyes and double zeros. You don't have to be choosy about losing your money; almost every door is the entrance to a gambling club. Business was brisk, but not as busy as it would be that night.

I wanted it to look aimless, so I started club-hopping. I played the slot machines in the first two places and dropped ten bucks. I looked around in the third club. There was a sleek-looking brunette at the dice table, and I wandered over just to get a whiff of her perfume. It was something special and so was she, but here everybody was watching the dice. I put five bucks on her point, figuring any girl who looked like that had to be hot. Maybe she was, but the dice were cold. I went on my way.

By easy stages, I finally arrived at the Silver Lode Club. It was as big as New York's Palace Theatre and almost as bright. Even in daylight the neon lights were glaring. Besides the name of the club, there were neon announcements of craps, faro bank, roulette, bingo parlor, jack pot arcade, and something that said "Thrill to the Old West." If the Old West had been anything like this those Forty-niners would never have had time to dig gold.

I looked at my watch. It was time. I went over to the dollar slot machine and started feeding silver cartwheels into it. On my sixth dollar I finally hit. Two cherries and a plum. The machine reluctantly coughed up two dollars. A big deal.

I took out my handkerchief and carefully wrapped the two silver dollars in it. I tucked it away in my pocket and went into the bar. I worked on a Canadian Club and waited, but nothing happened. I had another Canadian Club.

Half an hour later I went back to the slot machine. A chunky little woman gave a last vicious yank on the lever, watched nothing happen, and waddled away. I took over. This time I fed five dollars into it and then two cherries and a lemon came up. Four silver dollars clattered into the pay-off cup. At least my losses were getting lighter.

The handkerchief came out again. I had already taken out the money I'd wrapped in it before. Now I put the four cartwheels in it and twisted the whole thing into a ball. Feeling pretty silly about it, I went back to the bar. And the Canadian Club.

Another half hour went down the drain. So did three shots of Canadian Club. Nothing happened except that I began to feel enough of a glow so that I didn't care that nothing was happening. I figured it was time to go play with the one-armed bandit again. I went over, fed in a dollar, and pulled the lever. The wheels whirred and the three bands coasted to a stop. Two lemons and a bar. Nothing. I did it again, not paying too much attention to the machine. I was looking around, trying to size up the other people. Nobody looked like my dish of tea. They were nearly all women in the jack pot arcade, mostly a little on the heavy side, with a glassy look in their eyes. A bunch of tourists who didn't care how they got rid of their money.

I was watching one woman squealing over a handful of silver she'd finally extracted from a quarter machine when I heard the internal clicking in my machine that went with a pay-off. I swung my gaze back to it and got a brief glimpse of the three bars lined up. A jack pot! I grabbed at the bottom of the machine just as the dollars started pouring out. I caught some of them, but most of them fell to the floor, and I heard the women near me squealing with excitement at the cascade of silver.

There was only one way to handle this operation. When the machine stopped giving, I got out my handkerchief and spread it on the floor. Then I started stacking the dollars on it. Ever try to put eighty or ninety silver dollars in a handkerchief? Well, it can't be done. I stacked up as many as I could and put the rest in my pocket. I folded the four corners of the handkerchief over the stacked coins and lifted my bag of silver. Then somebody tapped me on the shoulder. I looked around.

He wasn't pretty. That was my first impression. So many people had worked on his face that it looked like a plastic surgeon's nightmare. He was a big guy, about six three, and probably weighed two hundred and thirty or forty. He was wearing a tux that might have been tailored to fit him, but somewhere along the line the tailor had given up the battle; he just couldn't cope with those muscles. The tux marked him as being part of the house.

"I been watching you," he said. His voice sounded like somebody had been using his throat to mix cement. "I don't like what I'm seeing."

"I haven't been watching you," I said, "but I don't like what I'm seeing either. Don't tell me you're one of the Thrills of the Old West."

His face twisted into something he probably thought was a grin. "A wise guy," he said. He leaned down to peer at me and I could see the old glove scars around his eyes. "Ain't I seen you somewhere?"

"I've been somewhere," I admitted.

His powerful fingers clamped down on my shoulder. "Don't get smart with me, Mac," he said. "What's your game?"

"I'm very good at parchesi," I said brightly.

He was a slow thinker, but it was getting through.

"Get your hand off my shoulder," I said. "I don't like it."

He clamped down harder. "Maybe I make you like it, Mac."

"Not you, sweetheart," I said. "You're not my type. The hand. Get it off. Now."

He took it off, but not because I told him to. He had the idea of lifting it a few inches, folding it into a fist, and then delivering a rabbit punch. But he telegraphed it, and I beat him to it. I swung the bag of silver dollars and laid it alongside his jaw. The silver dollars made a lovely sound as they hit.

He had a glass jaw all right. His eyes turned up, his mouth dropped open, and he went down like a big monkey sliding down a pole. One of the women in the arcade screamed. I headed for the street.

"Hey, you," somebody in back of me called.

I looked around. Another houseman was coming from the direction of the bar. This one looked a little smarter, but not much. Even from where I stood I could see the bulge under his left arm.

"Sorry, boy," I said. "Here—catch." I took one of the silver dollars from my pocket and tossed it to him.

A bewildered look came over his face and his hands automatically came up to catch the dollar which was spinning right at his head.

"A nice catch," I said. "I'll sign you up for the Dodgers if they ever start using dollars instead of baseballs."

His puzzled expression was giving way to anger as I went out through the door.

I cut off on Third Street and made my way to the *Plain Dealer* building. Jay Crowley was in his office. He jumped up and shook my hand, a big grin spreading over his lean face. He was a tall, stringbean type, with wiry black hair and a grin that made him look like a kid. He was a little older than me, maybe forty. As I said, he was always charged up. As editor and publisher of the *Plain Dealer,* he was always trying to do something about the crooks that were drawn in by the gambling.

"It's good to see you, Ciro," he said. He gestured to a chair in front of his cluttered desk. "Sit down. We can talk here. I guess they've never gotten around to planting a dictaphone in my office." He grinned again and ran a hand nervously through his hair. "You still spending the taxpayers' money?"

"Not still—again," I said. I lit a cigarette and tossed one to him. "You forget that I have my own agency. In between these junkets, I work for a living." The truth of the matter was that I worked twice as hard for half the money when I took one of these jobs, but everybody likes to pretend that working for the government is a soft snap. Who was I to spoil his fun?

Maybe I'd better backtrack a little. I've got a private detective agency in Washington, D. C., but part of the time I work for a Congressional investigating committee. Not one of those that spend all their time looking under beds; I snoop around for the Senate and House Joint Crime Committee. Whenever they go out on a junket, I'm the advance man. I dig up all the dirt on the local boys so they know what questions to ask and when to sneer at the answers. That was why I'd been in Las Vegas the year before.

This time it was the same thing, only different. I was on loan to the Special State Crime Commission of Nevada. Senator Andrews, co-chairman of the Congressional committee, was a good friend of Big Joe Hennessey, the

"I hit for two, four, and a jack pot," I said. I banged some of the silver dollars against his desk. "Nobody approached me but a crooked-nosed bouncer."

"Harry Manners," he said. "An ex-fighter. Dumb but tough and he'll do anything that Menotti asks him to."

"Well, he did one thing Menotti didn't ask for."

He looked his question.

"Took the long count," I said.

"You punched him?" Jay asked in delight.

"Not exactly," I said. "You might say he was a victim of high finance. He thought he recognized me. I wasn't cooperative about the identification, so he was going to rabbit-punch me. I slapped these silver dollars against his jaw. It's glass."

Jay Crowley laughed. "I would have loved to see that." Suddenly he sobered. "If there was a leak a year ago, it's probably still operating. Menotti must know you're here. He may even have had Harry watching for you."

"Yeah," I said. "It figures. That's why I didn't worry about the tap on your phone. And my friend, who writes anonymous letters, will have to look after himself until he gets to me."

"Maybe they've already stopped him and that's why you weren't contacted."

"Maybe." I snubbed out my cigarette and stood up. "And maybe he's just being careful. Anybody who's thinking of squealing on Ricci Menotti ought to have enough sense to be careful. I'll keep you posted, Jay."

"Do," he said. "Let me know if there's anything I can do. And come out to dinner one night. Maggie'll be sore if you don't." Maggie was the kind of swell girl you'd expect a guy like him to marry.

"When I'm sure there won't be any uninvited guests following me," I said.

I went out and walked back to my hotel, went up to my room and relaxed on the bed. There wasn't anything I could do but wait. Or maybe there was one other thing I could do. I phoned room service and told them to send up a bottle of Canadian Club and some ice. I lit a cigarette and contemplated the silver dollars which I had piled up on the dresser.

There was a knock on the door. Thinking that room service was speeding up, I went over and opened it.

They came in fast. Two of them. Performing a kind of sinister ballet, they walked on the balls of their feet and managed never to turn their faces away from me. Their eyes did a quick inventory of the room and came back to me.

I knew one of them. He had a long, sallow face set in a permanent mask of sadness. Chronic hay fever made his eyes always seem to be watering. His name was Wade. I'd never heard his first name, for everybody called him Weeper. He was big in the gun department and he went back a long way. Everybody had investigated him. He'd been up before Dewey in New York. Kefauver had investigated him; so had our committee. He'd been around the day Kid Twist Reles "jumped" from the hotel in New York. He'd also been around when somebody almost got Mickey Cohen in Hollywood and the night somebody did get Bugsy Siegel through the window of his girl friend's house. Everybody knew a lot about Weeper Wade, but the only time he'd ever done had been a year for contempt of Congress.

The other guy was younger, but his face didn't do any more for him than Weeper's did. All emotion had been washed out of it. He was looking at me the way a carpenter might look at a piece of wood to see where was the best place to bore a hole.

"You got the wrong room, boys," I said. "The girls are down the hall."

"You see," Weeper said, without taking his eyes off me. "Ciro's a card. If somebody was to bump him off, he'd have to make a joke first."

"Hi, Weeper," I said. There weren't any guns showing, but I didn't let it fool me. I didn't know about the other guy, but Weeper could get a gun out faster than I could think about it. "Who's your friend?"

"Eddie Trey. He's a good boy."

"If he's with you, he must be," I said. "You boys sit down and I'll send down for ice cream and cookies."

The younger one made a sound in his throat. "We ain't here to listen to the corny gags," he said.

Weeper Wade shook his head at me, looking as if he would burst out sobbing any minute. "You shouldn't ought to have laid one on Harry Manners like you did," he said. "You almost broke his jaw."

"He wouldn't take his hands off me," I explained. "I thought maybe he was making a pass at me right in front of all those nice old ladies from Sauk Centre."

Eddie Trey snickered, but his expression didn't change.

"Ricci don't like it," Weeper Wade said. "As soon as Harry woke up and described the guy what clobbered him, we figured it was you. Ricci asked us to come over and tell you that you should be more friendly."

I didn't believe it. The only thing Ricci Menotti would consider a friendly act would be cutting my throat. "What does Ricci think I should do to prove I'm friendly?" I asked.

"There's a plane out of Las Vegas at six o'clock tonight."

"The chamber of commerce won't like it," I said.

Eddie Trey made a suggestion about the chamber of commerce that they would have liked even less. "You better be on that plane," he repeated.

"And if I'm not?"

"You know how it is, Ciro," Weeper Wade said. If possible, he looked even sadder. "There are a lot of guys in town who don't like you. We don't want nothing to happen to you, but it'll be kind of hard to watch you all the time if you stay in town."

"Don't think I'm not touched by this display of affection," I said, "because I'm not. Now you boys run back to your knitting and I'll see you around." I opened the door.

"This guy's too fresh," Eddie Trey said, his voice hardening. His gaze flicked over me, hesitating a moment at the spot under my left arm. "You loaded, Copper?"

"If I weren't," I said, "I'd be practically undressed in this company."

"I'm going to like taking you," he said. His eyes were bright and I could see his body tense.

I could feel my throat getting dry. I'd figured this for a threatening visit, a dry run, but Eddie Trey was trying to turn it into a scheduled flight. With two of them, I was going to have a little trouble getting off the ground. But I didn't let on. "Sorry," I told him brightly, "I never go out with younger boys."

He made that sound deep in his throat again, but Weeper Wade saved the day.

"Nix, Eddie," he said. "Ricci didn't say anything about dusting him. Put it on ice. We'll see you, Ciro."

I didn't like the way he said it. "Don't push yourselves," I said. "I'm the unsociable type."

"We'll see you," Weeper said again. "Come on, Eddie."

They left the way they had come in, managing the difficult feat of getting out of the room without actually turning their backs on me. I closed the door and went over and sat on the bed again. My knees felt shaky, as though I'd just finished running up a long flight of stairs.

I was sure glad to see the bellboy when he arrived with the bottle. I told him to help himself to one of the cartwheels on the dresser and I poured myself a drink. He took a dollar and left. I tried the drink on for size, and began to feel a little better.

I was working on my third drink and feeling no pain when there was a knock on my door. This was going to be my busy day.

"Come in," I yelled. If they were coming back, there was no reason why I should make it easier for them by opening the door.

The door swung open and she came in. Floated might have been a better word. The door closed and she looked at me. I looked back. It was one of the easiest things I ever did.

I'd found my blonde again. Now she was wearing a red evening dress that clung to her figure, revealing the luscious curves I'd guessed were there.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello, Valda," I said. Then I waited to see what was up. She hadn't shown any passion for visiting me the last time I saw her.

"I'm 'A Friend,' " she said.

"I'm feeling pretty friendly myself," I said. Then it hit me. "You mean you're *A Friend?*"

She nodded.

"But why didn't you say something at the party?"

"I didn't know you were the investigator," she said. "In fact, I was surprised when you were the one who showed up at the Silver Lode."

"You were there?"

She nodded again. "But you were watched, so I didn't dare speak to you."

It made sense. But there was another point I had to clear up.

"You're a friend of Big Joe's?" I asked.

"For a long time."

"How come the anonymous letter then?" I wanted to know. "Why didn't you just tell him? He's supposed to be on the level. Isn't he?"

"He is," she said, "but sometimes someone who's on the level tells what he knows to somebody else he *thinks* is on the level—and after a while it reaches somebody who *isn't* on the level."

"Okay," I said, "I guess you're right." It was hard to keep my mind on business, but I decided it was necessary. "What's the pitch?"

"I saw you at the Silver Lode," she said again, "but there could have been a slip-up. Have you any identification?"

My opinion of her went up. I nodded and fished out a couple of cards. One was signed by Senator Andrews and Representative August, co-chairmen of the Congressional committee. It carried my picture and fingerprints and almost everything except an endorsement from J. Edgar Hoover. The other, signed by the Nevada commission, identified me as working for the state. I handed them to her. She looked them over and gave them back.

"I can't stay," she said. For the first time, I noticed she was nervous. I couldn't blame her. "It's a long story, and I didn't dare bring the evidence with me. I saw two of Ricci's men leaving the hotel a minute ago. They were here, weren't they?"

I nodded. "They were playing chamber of commerce in reverse; they thought I'd be happier somewhere else. I disagreed, and after that the conversation sort of dragged."

"It's dangerous for us to talk here," she said. "Can you meet me tonight?"

Maybe it was just because I wanted it that way, but I thought she was being friendlier. "Okay," I said. "When and where?"

"Do you have a car?"

"I can rent one."

"Be sure you aren't followed," she said breathlessly. "Go out Fifth Street and take U.S. Route 93 out past the

Nellis Airforce Base. Turn right on the road that leads to the Valley of Fire. Take the second road to the right, and it's the third cabin. I'll try to be there by eight, but if I'm not here's a key. Wait for me inside." She took a key from her purse and handed it to me.

"I'll be there," I said.

She gave me a smile as she turned and left the room. My last glimpse of her was of her rounded hips moving sleekly beneath the red dress like sensuous semaphores.

I took another drink of Canadian Club and moved around the room. The scent of her perfume still hung faintly in the air and it made me restless. Maybe it was that, or maybe it was the glow I'd gotten out of the bottle, but I felt more sociable. I put the bottle away and went down to the bar.

It was a lushly decorated room—if you overlooked the usual slot machines—dimly lit, with the kind of atmosphere that could fit either serious drinking or the cocktail nibbling that goes with romance. I had the first on my mind, but it was nice to know the other wasn't ruled out.

I sat at the circular bar and went back to Canadian Club. There were three couples halfway around the circle from me. Two women were playing slot machines in the shadows at one side. Some canned music floated unobtrusively in the background. The bartender served me and went back to an interrupted conversation with the couples.

Three interruptions later, I had built the glow to a point where I was impatient for the night. I took the key out of my pocket and looked at it, wondering how many locks it was going to open. I slipped it back in my pocket. Then I became aware that someone had climbed on the stool next to mine. I took a quick look, then went back for a repeat.

She had everything the blonde did, and had it in technicolor. She wore a green dress that left little to the imagination—and she had everything that was needed to go with such a dress. All of this was topped off with red hair, the color of a newly minted penny, falling to her shoulders. When I finally got around to looking at her face, I realized she was staring at me. There was amusement in her eyes, as though she knew what I was thinking.

I was about to make a scintillating remark when she beat me to it. "Mr. Blake?" she asked.

There wasn't any topper to that. I admitted that I was Ciro Blake and let her keep the ball.

She leaned closer and her warm scent reached out and stroked my senses. It was a Chanel, but which one didn't make any difference; it had my number on it. And the view, when she leaned over, was terrific.

"I'm sorry I missed you before," she said softly.

I didn't have any idea what she was talking about, but it sounded too promising to spoil. "So am I," I said, "but we can make up for it now."

"Not here," she said.

"Why not?" I wanted to know. I looked at her left hand. No rings, but that doesn't always mean anything. "Married?"

She threw back her head and laughed. "You don't understand," she said. "I'm 'A Friend.' "

"A friend?" I repeated. Suddenly I was a little friend of all the world.

"I wrote the letter," she said. "But it's not safe to talk here. Come to my apartment tonight and I'll give you the evidence." The expression in her eyes gave me the idea that wouldn't be all she'd give. "My apartment is on Merlin Avenue. The number and the address are on this key. If I'm out, wait for me."

She pressed a key into my hand, slid off the stool, and walked quickly out of the bar. Her hips moved like twin promissory notes.

I lifted my jaw back into place and stared at the key clutched in my hot little hand. It was a hell of a note. Here I was with two *friends*—and either one looked as if she could give a man about all the friendship he could stand. But one of them had to be a phony.

I turned around and ordered another drink. I was going to need it.

CHAPTER 2

Later that afternoon I went to rent a car. While I was at it, I decided to give myself a little extra break in case I had to run for it. I took a Cadillac. I went back to the hotel, showered, and changed clothes. Then I drove down on the Strip and had dinner at the Desert Inn. It was early and the food was good so I took my time and enjoyed it. Finally, after brandy and coffee, I felt like taking on the world. Or at least the blonde.

I'd thought it all out. It was a pretty good bet the redhead was the phony. If the blonde had been the plant she would have been afraid to go through with it after meeting me at Hennessey's. If her connections were bad, there would have been the danger of Big Joe telling me about her. Even though he didn't know she was the writer of the letter, the fact that she was one of his friends made her look good. The redhead had just popped in out of nowhere; she'd said her little piece and had run away before I could ask her any embarrassing questions. But I had to admit, remembering how she looked, that Ricci Menotti had good taste in women.

I left the restaurant at a little after seven and drove north on Fifth Street. I drove slowly, keeping my eye on the rear vision mirror. It didn't take me long to spot the big black sedan that was following me. I decided I'd been smart to take a Cadillac.

When I reached Fremont, I turned right and drove leisurely until I hit Bruce. I took another right turn and began to pick up speed. The other car matched me. Another right turn on Lewis, then up Spencer, and I started pouring it on. I was trusting to memory of the streets, but it was working out all right so far. I whipped around

Carson Avenue and cut down Seventeenth Street with screeching tires. Around and up Earl Street and then doubled back to Spencer. I went straight across Charleston Boulevard, down to Curtis Drive, cut around and up Thelma Lane, then up Chapman until I hit the boulevard again. I drove down it to Fifteenth, up to Joshua Way and whipped left. For the first time I slowed down enough to look around. I checked the mirror. There was only the empty, dark street behind me. I'd shaken them off. I went on my way again, feeling pretty pleased with myself.

It wasn't quite eight when I reached the cabin. It was away from the main road and other houses, all by itself in a clump of trees. There was no light in it and no other car in sight, so Valda wasn't there yet.

Just because I never take chances, I drove past it. I turned the car around and parked it on the road out of sight of the cabin. Then I walked back and let myself in with the key Valda had given me. I found the lights and turned them on.

It wasn't exactly what people have in mind when they talk about Abe Lincoln having been born in a cabin. This was a Rockefeller type cabin. It was only three rooms, but it had about everything that a simple millionaire might want. If Valda had furnished it, she was in the chips.

I gave the cabin the once-over, out of habit, and then sat down to wait. After a while I heard a car pull up in front of the cabin. The motor cut off and the door slammed. Then the cabin door swung open and she came in. She was still wearing the red evening dress. The wind had ruffled her hair and she seemed a little breathless, which somehow made her even more attractive than I had remembered.

To hell with the job, I thought, and did what I'd been wanting to do since I first saw her. I pulled her into my arms and kissed her.

She hadn't been expecting it. There was a moment of resistance, then her lips grew soft. For just a minute she returned my kiss, her body pressed against mine. Then she put her hands against my chest and shoved me away.

"No," she said.

I got a glimpse of her eyes and realized that she wasn't all ice, the way she'd seemed. Maybe she even felt the way I did. But she was fighting to keep it strictly on a business basis.

Any way I looked at it, she was a lot of woman. She had only kissed me for a minute and she had me feeling like a boy on his first date.

She must have read my expression, for she shook her head. "No," she said again, and I could hear her fighting to keep her voice steady. She seemed to be looking for a time-killer. "How about a drink, Ciro?" she said.

"Okay," I said. I got out two cigarettes, lit them, and handed one to her. Her fingers touched mine like an electric shock. She turned and led the way into the next room, a combination bedroom and study. Against one wall, next to the fireplace, there was a portable bar.

"What will you have, Ciro?" she asked. She was keeping her face turned away from me.

"Canadian Club," I said. "Straight."

She poured me a drink and then mixed one for herself with ice and water. She carried them over to a love seat in front of the fireplace. She looked at me and I walked over and took my drink. We sat down, carefully keeping an inch or two of space between us.

"To us," I said, raising my glass.

"To friendship," she said firmly. But I knew she was making herself say it. That kiss had shaken her as much as it had me, even though she didn't want to admit it.

We drank. Then she set her glass down and looked at me. "This isn't turning out to be quite what I had in mind," she said honestly.

"Me neither," I admitted. I took a deep breath and tried to get myself back on the track. "Maybe we ought to talk about Ricci Menotti."

She shook her head. "Later," she said. "I don't go around kissing strange men. I've got to get over that first."

"I'm not a strange man," I protested with a grin.

"You are and you aren't," she said seriously. She leaned her head back against the seat and then suddenly she was talking, telling me things about herself. They weren't the vital statistics or even very important things, just little odds and ends that made me feel I knew her pretty well, and I liked what I knew. When she paused, I found myself doing the same thing. To my surprise, I told her things I hadn't talked about in years.

After a while we stopped talking by mutual consent. I leaned over and kissed her again. This time her lips worked softly against mine, and her tongue was like hot lightning.

Again she pulled away from me abruptly. "Could we have another drink?" she asked. "I'm sorry, Ciro, just one." There was a strange urgency in her voice, as though she needed it badly.

"Sure, honey," I said. "I'll get them."

"No," she said, pushing me back with her hand. "Let me do it. I want to do everything for you I can."

She crossed the room swiftly and bent over the bar. Her hands shook as the whisky splashed into the glasses.

"You know," I said, getting up and crossing to her, "you've told me a lot about yourself, but I still don't know your last name."

She turned around with the drinks. "Maybe we should leave it like that, so if you talk in your sleep . . ." She trailed off as she handed me my drink. "I'm sorry it had to start this way, Ciro."

"Why?"

"We should have just met," she said. "There shouldn't have to be any business or things like that."

"That won't take up too much time," I said. I lifted my glass and this time I said the right thing. "To us."

She looked at me over the top of her glass. "I didn't know you were going to be like this."

I tossed off my drink and put the glass down. "Like what?"

"This," she repeated, as though there were no other words for it. She drained her glass and set it down. She looked at me, then was in my arms again. She lifted her face and I could feel her body shudder and become part of me. She moaned softly, her voice like the sound of a muted violin, as I kissed her. Then she drew away from me. She stepped back, but her eyes never left my face.

She reached around behind her and suddenly her dress fell about her feet. She stepped out of it, her gaze still locked to mine. She wore nothing but her stockings and shoes. Her body was like warm ivory, her breasts like coral-tipped petals.

"Hello," she whispered.

She waited there for me, not moving, hardly breathing. I tossed my own clothes on a chair, feeling my breath catch in my throat. I picked her up, soft and yielding, her flesh like a ball of fire against my skin, and carried her to the bed.

"Quickly," she whispered as I pressed my mouth down on hers. Her breath was sweet with desire. . . .

Later, I got two cigarettes and lit them. I passed one to her and stretched out beside her. My arm felt so heavy it was an effort to lift the cigarette. I raised my head to look at her. Her body, sprawled in languor, seemed almost lifeless except for the gentle rise and fall of her breasts. She turned to look at me. Her face was soft, but there was a strange expression in her eyes. I couldn't tell what it was.

While I was watching Valda, it suddenly seemed to me that the lights had dimmed. I looked up at them, and they wavered and grew still dimmer. I looked back at the girl. The lines of her face were blurred, her expression was even harder to read. My eyes strained in the darkening room, trying to focus, but it was no use. I let my head fall heavily back on the pillow.

Then I got it. I'd been drugged. That's why the lights were going out, the room beginning to spin.

I tried to ask her about it. "Did you—" I began, but my tongue was too thick to handle the words.

I felt her reach over and take the cigarette from my tired fingers. Her voice seemed to come from a great distance. "I'm sorry, Ciro," she said. That was the last thing I heard.

When I came to, my head was aching and my insides were twisted with cramps. I just made it to the bathroom in time. I leaned weakly against the sink and turned on the cold water. After I had splashed it on my face and drunk about a gallon of it I felt a little better, though my head still ached. I groped my way back into the bedroom and fell on the bed. I closed my eyes, then opened them again. I was beginning to remember what had happened.

As I looked around the room, I saw that my clothes were still crumpled on the chair. Valda's evening gown was a little mound of red in the middle of the floor. The glasses and bottle were where we'd left them. Valda was still lying beside me on the bed. Everything was the same.

Then I began to tremble. Something new had been added. There was a small, bluish-black hole beside Valda's left breast. Dried blood made a black streak down across her ribs and a big stain on the sheet. I didn't have to touch her to know she was dead.

Looking at her didn't make me feel any better. I could still smell her perfume on my chest and arms; I could still remember the way her body had felt in life, the tingling warmth of her skin and the sweetness of her mouth. I could remember the way she'd talked to me, telling me little personal things about herself. It hurt to realize she was dead. Without looking at her again, I rolled off the bed and went to my clothes. I found my watch; it told me I'd been unconscious an hour and a half. A hell of a lot can happen in an hour and a half. A hell of a lot had.

I sat on the chair and tried to think it out. I remembered realizing that I'd been drugged just before I had passed out. And Valda was the only one who could have drugged my drink. It had to be that last drink—I remembered her urgency in asking me to have it. I remembered other things, too. She'd refused to tell me her last name. She'd told me a lot about herself, but nothing about who she was. And there was her remark about being sorry that it had started like this.

It hurt like hell, but there was only one conclusion. Despite the good auspices of our meeting at Big Joe's, Valda wasn't the one who'd written the letter. She had to be part of a plot to get me—only part, because she'd never have gone along with it if she'd known her own death was in it. But somebody else must have planned it that way from the very beginning. That was why I'd been drugged.

I'd been staring at the floor for several minutes when I realized I was looking at my own gun. It had been in the holster, hanging over the back of the chair, the last I knew. I picked it up and waved it under my nose. It had been fired, all right. And it didn't take two guesses to realize where it had been fired.

Now I really snapped out of the drug stupor. This was more than a beautiful girl murdered; it was even more than the murder of a girl I was going to remember for a long time, even though I had known her for only an hour or two. This was also a guy right in the middle of a first-class frame, and I was the guy. Unless I got a move on, I was going to be caught, for Valda had been the luscious bait for the first half of the frame; the other half would probably be along any minute.

My legs were shaky and my head still ached, but I didn't waste any more time feeling sorry for myself. I started throwing my clothes on as fast as I could. Finally I buckled on the shoulder holster, slipped the gun back into it, and shrugged into my coat. I was looking around the room to see if there was any other evidence of my visit when I heard a car pulling up in front. Time was running out like a scared jack rabbit.

I thought about fingerprints. I ran into the bathroom and dabbed at the cold water faucet with a towel. Back in the bedroom, I scooped up the bottle of Canadian Club and the two glasses and headed for the back of the cabin.

Luckily there was a back door. I opened it and slipped outside. I could hear the murmur of voices from the front and then the scuff of feet coming toward me. I didn't wait to hear any more. I went into the woods as fast as I could.

I was already feeling my way among the trees, going in what I hoped was the right direction, when I heard someone pounding on the door of the cabin.

I came out of the woods onto the road. For once I was grateful for my suspicious nature, which had made me park the car out of sight of the cabin. I hurried to it and got in, thankful that it wasn't a cold night; there wasn't any time to warm the motor. I merely stamped on the accelerator and the big Cadillac got under way, crushing me against the back of the seat. Only then did I switch on the lights.

I must have been doing sixty by the time I passed the cabin. I had a blurred impression of the two cars parked before it and of the open front door with the light spilling out. I could see one man in the doorway and another out in front. Then they were behind me.

There was a shout, fading away almost before it was uttered, and a noise that sounded as if someone had pulled a cork out of a bottle. One of them had snapped a shot at me, but it had been a clean miss.

I nursed the Cadillac along as fast as the curves would let me. When I swung left onto Route 93, I really gunned it. I knew they had little chance of catching me and I remembered there hadn't been a phone in the cabin, but there were good reasons for being in a hurry.

A frame that had been planned that carefully would be sure to have a tag with my name on it somewhere. It would only be a matter of time before the cops would be around to see me, and I had to be ready for them. Cops are the same everywhere; some of them are in somebody's pocket and some are so honest they'll throw their own grandmothers in the jug. Here, some of them would be wearing Ricci Menotti's tag, and they'd be out to get me. The evidence would be strong enough to make the honest ones want to get me, too.

What I needed was an alibi, and that would be plenty hard to dig up. I knew only two people in Las Vegas. One of them was Big Joe Hennessey. He wasn't apt to provide me with an alibi. The other was Jay Crowley. He'd jump at the chance, but the more I thought about it the more I shied away from it. It was a pretty good bet that the men at the cabin—who were probably cops—had caught the license number on the Cadillac as I raced by. They could trace it to me. There was a chance I'd left some evidence, maybe fingerprints, in the cabin. I decided I'd better leave Jay out of the picture; he could do me more good on the outside than if he were in the cell next to mine.

It was almost ten o'clock when I arrived back at the hotel. I put the car away in the hotel garage and went to my room. I sent for a bellboy and asked him to get me a box about the size of a shoe box and some wrapping paper. He was back in a few minutes.

As soon as he was out of the room, I took my gun and holster and wrapped them in a shirt. I put the whole thing in the box, wrapped it and addressed it to my office in Washington, and marked it "Special Delivery." Then I rang for the bellboy again, gave him a handful of silver dollars, and he promised to take the package right to the post office.

There was another gun among my things—a .32 with a three-inch barrel. I got it and the holster for it and put them on. Luckily, I had a Nevada license for both guns.

I checked the time. A quarter after. I picked up the phone and gave the operator Jay Crowley's home number.

Jay answered himself. "Hi, Ciro," he said when he recognized my voice. "Coming out?"

"Right now," I said dryly, "I'm worried about staying out. Is there any place I can get hold of a photographer at this time of night?"

"Why?"

"To take pictures."

"I know, but what kind of pictures?"

"Just pictures," I said. "Nothing special. I just feel like having my picture taken. I'll explain when I see you."

"If that's all you want," he said, "Sutton's Studio stays open until about midnight. Earl Sutton. They get a lot of calls from the clubs."

"Good," I said. I wanted to ask him something else, but I hesitated. When I thought of her name I thought of the way her lips had felt, and it hurt to remember. "Maybe you can tell me one more thing," I said. "Would you know a blonde whose first name is Valda? A looker. Maybe about twenty-five. Owned or had access to a cabin out toward the Valley of Fire."

"Valda?" he repeated. "Might be Valda Menotti, Ricci's wife. Why?"

That really hit me right between the eyes. I didn't answer. I was too busy thinking.

"Ciro," he said sharply. "Are you still there?"

"You must be mistaken," I said finally. "I met her out at Big Joe's. Ricci's wife wouldn't be there. Big Joe's on the level. Isn't he?"

"Big Joe's on the level," he said. There was something funny about his voice. "Maybe you'd better come out and see me."

I knew he was thinking about a phone tap. "To hell with the tap," I said harshly. "She's dead. So why was she at Big Joe's?"

"Dead? Where? What happened?"

"To hell with that, too," I told him. "Why was she at Big Joe's?"

"Even level guys are interested in women," he said. "I don't know if it was true, but I heard a rumor that she was Big Joe's mistress."

That hit me, too. I knew it was silly, especially when she'd helped to frame me, but I couldn't help it. I'd met her that afternoon and we'd done something about it that night. Sure, that had happened with dozens of other girls, and I'd never worried whether any of them were leading convent lives or not, but this was different. This blonde had thrown some kind of a hook in me and now she was dead. And I couldn't stop remembering how she felt and looked and what her perfume was like.

"What happened, Ciro?" he asked again.

"I'll see you around, Jay," I said and hung up. I thought of calling Big Joe Hennessey, but I knew I couldn't do that. I couldn't just call up a guy and tell him that his mistress was dead and I'd been in bed with her when she was killed and then ask him what he knew about her. If he were mixed up with her, he might even be willing to believe I'd killed her.

I tried to put her out of my mind, and then I remembered the redhead. She must be the real thing, the one who'd written the letter. I'd have to see her quickly, but I had other things to do first. I remembered her key. I didn't want the cops to find it in my pocket, so I took it out and put it in with my shirts in the dresser. In doing so, I discovered I still had the key to Valda's cabin. I took it and dropped it in the water tank of the toilet.

Then I followed Jay's suggestion and phoned the Sutton Studio. Some guy answered and promised he'd send a photographer right over to my room. I hung up and went back to working on my bottle of Canadian Club and pacing the floor. I hoped the photographer was going to move faster than the cops did.

It was about twenty minutes before there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," I yelled. I slipped out of my coat and had my tie off before I looked around. It wasn't quite what I'd expected.

A girl, carrying a large pigskin bag, stood in the doorway. She was small, no more than five feet three. At first glance she didn't have much of a figure, but then I realized it was the suit she was wearing. Under the straight tailored jacket, she was stacked. She had tousled black hair and the face of a gamin. Not pretty in the usual sense, but there was something nice about it. At any other time, I might've been interested.

"You've got the wrong room, honey," I said. "Run along. I'm busy."

She cocked her head to one side and looked at me. There was a humorous look in her eyes. "The friendly type," she said. "The big grin and dog curled up at your feet. Is that the way you want it?"

"Is that the way I want what?" I snapped.

"The picture. I'm Carla Blane, girl photographer." She grinned. "Sounds like a television soap opera, doesn't it?"

That stopped me cold. "You're from the Sutton Studio?"

"Right, Buster. And you're—" she looked at a card in her hand—"Ciro Blake. You see how easy it is when you try? A man who wants his picture taken and a girl who can do it. You want a nice portrait shot?" Her gaze went to the shoulder holster which was still strapped around me, and her tone got drier. "Or maybe you want an action shot?"

"I have a permit for it, if that's what's worrying you," I said.

"They all do," she replied.

"Look," I told her, "I haven't the time for gay chit-chat with you. And I don't want a girl photographer. I want a man photographer. Now you run back to the studio as fast as your chubby little legs—" I took another look and changed it—"as fast as your pretty little legs will take you and send over a man."

She shook her head. "The only man there is Ernie, in the dark room. He wouldn't know which end of a camera to point at you. Besides, he's busy. What's wrong with girls?"

"Nothing's wrong with girls," I said. "I like girls. Some of my best friends are girls. But a girl photographer's no good for the pictures I want."

"Filthy pictures?" she asked brightly.

"Oh, hell," I said. I was beginning to get angry, mostly at myself. If anybody had asked, I would have been the first to say that modesty was a lot of nonsense. But that wasn't the way I was feeling just then. Still, if she were the only photographer, I didn't have much choice. "Look," I said. "I want some pictures of myself in the nude, but that's all. Just plain, ordinary pictures."

"Oh, very ordinary," she said. "Now I've heard everything."

"So go back and send a man. Only make it fast."

"Relax your arteries, Buster," she said. Her voice was tougher now. "I told you there ain't no man. I'll take your pictures. You haven't got anything I haven't seen before. Or if you have, maybe I ought to know about it." She gave me a mocking grin. "What do you want, French magazine art or good old physical culture poses?"

"Just plain pictures, with plenty of light. One front view, one of each side, and one of the back."

She was bending over, unpacking her bag. "I've got a flash on the camera and two more on extensions. That ought to be enough to bring out all your rugged male beauty. Okay, Buster, take 'em off."

She paid no more attention to me than if I'd been another piece of furniture. After fiddling around with my shirt for five minutes, I finally got the rest of my clothes off. Then I stood there, feeling as foolish as if I were about ten years old and had been caught in somebody's watermelon patch. This, I thought, would be a fine time for the cops to walk in.

"Ready," she said crisply. She had a Speed Graphic on a tripod and two flash bulbs were leering at me from the extensions.

I stood up straight and tried to look casual. It can't be done without clothes.

She was looking into the ground glass at the back of the camera. "You want to leave that lipstick on your shoulder?" she asked.

I looked down. There was a smear of lipstick on my left shoulder. Valda's lipstick. As I looked at it, I could see her lying on the bed back in the cabin. It made me sick to think of a bunch of cops pawing over her lifeless body. I scrubbed at the smear with my hand.

"To hell with you," I said to the girl. "Just take your pictures and save the lip for them that likes it."

"Yes, sir," she said with mock humility.

She started clicking the camera, and the pictures were soon taken. I climbed into my clothes, feeling as though

I'd been granted a reprieve just before sitting in the chair. The girl was already putting her camera away.

"Would you like to see proofs, sir?" she asked sweetly. But she didn't mean it—the sweetness, that is.

I was feeling better now that I had my clothes on again. "What I want," I said, "is two eight-by-ten prints of each shot. I want the time and date they were taken put on the back of each print. And I want the prints back here as fast as it can possibly be done."

"You could probably have them in about thirty minutes, but it would cost you at least double."

"To hell with what it costs. Just get them back here as fast as you can."

"Okay, Buster," she said, giving me a long look out of that pert little face. "I'll have the prints back here in half an hour." She picked up her pigskin bag and left.

She was as good as her word. It was just a half hour later that she showed up with the prints. I looked at them carefully. The time and date were on the backs of them. The lighting in the pictures was good. Then I looked at the bill. It was good, too—good and big. But if this worked it was worth it. I started stuffing one set of the pictures into an envelope.

"Do me a favor?" I asked.

"Maybe," she said. "What?"

I wrote the address on the envelope. "Drop this in the mail for me on your way out."

"Who's the lucky girl?" she asked dryly.

I grinned and finished addressing the envelope. Then I slapped some stamps on it and handed it to her. She looked at the address and her eyebrows went up.

"He's going to turn it into that kind of newspaper?" she asked.

I laughed.

"I don't get it," she said. "I've seen a lot of screwy things in this town, but this one wins the gold-plated horseshoe. Do you think you could explain it without shocking my maiden ears?"

"Not now," I said. "I'm expecting to do some entertaining any minute now. If I live through that, I'll call you up and tell you all about it."

"That's the way it goes," she said flippantly. "They tease me and then brush me off." But despite her flippancy, she'd caught the important part of what I'd said and she didn't lose any time getting out.

I poured myself a drink and sat down to wait. I was sure that they'd get around to me before the night was over. I was right.

When the knock came, it was heavy enough to jar the door. Only cops ever knock like that.

I got up and poured myself another drink, letting them knock again. Then I said, "Come in."

The door opened and three of them came into the room, two big guys and a little wiry one. One of the big guys was red-faced and beefy. He had cop written all over him.

"You Ciro Blake?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?" I countered.

"I do," he said. He came over and stood spraddle-legged in front of me.

"You'll have to do better than that," I told him. "I don't answer questions for any bum who happens to stumble into this hotel."

His face got a little redder. "Police," he said. He flipped his coat and let me see his badge. And the gun that hung on his hip.

"I'm Ciro Blake," I said. "And I don't want any tickets to a policemen's benefit."

"A wise guy," he said. He put one big beefy hand on my chest and shoved. I sat down so quickly that some of the whisky spilled. "We want to ask you some questions, Blake. You're going to give straight answers or we'll pound them out of you."

CHAPTER 3

I finished the whisky before the rest of it could be spilled, then I looked them over. There are cops and cops. After a while you get so you can see and feel the difference. The two big ones were tough and they liked what they were going to do. They had that tight look that comes from being pushed down in somebody's pocket. The little guy was different. There was a sour look on his face. He didn't like it, but that wasn't going to cut any cake for me now. He was probably a good cop but he knew he couldn't make a career out of it.

"Just cops?" I asked. "Or do you have names?"

"I'm Lieutenant Baker," the one in front of me said. He jerked a thumb at the other big guy. "Jim Drake. And Sergeant Sam Sackley." Sackley was the little guy. The lieutenant's tone told me I'd been right about him.

"The rest of the force outside in the hall?" I asked.

He ignored me and jerked his head around to look at his friend. "Shake him down, Jim."

The other big cop came over to me, smelling of stale beer, and started pawing at my clothes. He yanked my gun from the holster and handed it to the lieutenant. Baker made a big show of sniffing at the barrel and looking to see if there were any empty shells. But it was only a show.

"I remember you from last year, Blake," he said heavily. "I looked you up in the files. You got a Nevada permit for two guns. A .38 and a .32. Where's the big one?"

"Back in Washington," I said.

"Why'd you leave it there?"

I grinned at him. "You know how it is," I said. "Small game, small gun."

I saw something turn over deep in his eyes and I knew whose pocket he was in. Ricci Menotti's.

"Maybe I do know how it is," he said thickly. "Tell me something, Blake. She was a tasty-looking broad. I can't blame you for giving her a strong play, but why kill her afterwards? That the way you get your kicks?"

I wanted to punch him in the face, but instead I gave him another grin. "Sounds more in your line, Lieutenant," I said. "Who am I supposed to have killed? I don't know what you're talking about."

His face had turned a mottled red. "The hell you don't," he said. He curled one big fist around my coat lapel and jerked me to my feet. "We know you pushed her over and then killed her. Make it easy on yourself by spilling it now."

I reached up and pushed his hand off my coat so I could step back. I needed fresher air.

"Who did you say I'm supposed to have killed?" I asked.

"Valda Menotti."

Every time I heard her name I could feel her lips against mine, but I didn't let the memory linger. "Any relation to Ricci?" I asked.

"His wife."

I tried to look surprised. "I know Ricci, but I never had the pleasure of meeting his wife."

"You had the pleasure," said the second big cop. He snickered, sounding as though he were reading something written on the wall of a men's room.

The lieutenant didn't take his eyes off me. "Yeah," he said. "We got you dead to rights, Blake. We get a call tonight that there's something going on out at Ricci Menotti's cabin. We go out. There are lights in the cabin, but nobody answers the door. We break in and find Ricci's wife with a bullet hole in her. It's pretty obvious she's been rolling in the hay with someone just before she's killed. Then somebody makes a break for it in a big car. We can't stop him but we get the license number. It turns out to be a car you rented tonight."

"Maybe you made a mistake," I suggested.

"No mistake," he grunted. "The killer tried to mop up fast but he missed a few fingerprints. When the report's in, I'm betting they'll be your prints. I'm also betting that the bullet in her will match that big gun of yours when we find it. I don't know much about the fancy stuff, but the lab man tells me that if she was in the hay with some guy he can prove it and can even tie it up to the guilty guy."

I had a picture of them cutting into the blonde and examining her beauty as though she were no more than a piece of beef. It made me sick. "Why aren't you down watching him work on her?" I asked. "You'd probably get a big kick out of it."

The other big cop made a sound in his throat, but the lieutenant waved him away. "Never mind, Jim," he said. "We're going to sweat all that out of the sonuvabitch. He won't be so smart when we're through with him."

"Maybe you'll be smarter," I suggested.

He looked at me and I could tell what he was thinking by the way his big hands closed on each other. "You think you got connections, Blake," he said flatly. "You think you're too big a man to be pushed around. Is that it? I know all about you. You were out here last year, working for Congress, trying to pin a rap on Ricci Menotti. This time you're working for Nevada. You're still trying to pin a rap on Ricci Menotti. Maybe you think they won't like it if I push you around a little."

"The thought had occurred to me," I admitted, "but I wasn't building a big thing out of it."

He grunted with something like amusement. "Get smart, Blake. This is too messy. You make love to the wife of the guy you're after and then bump her off. Even if they think you're innocent, they'll drop you like a hot potato."

He was right about that, but I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of admitting it. "Maybe," I said.

"Best way to do this," he said, "is for you to tell us why you killed her. Then we'll make it as quiet a trial as we can."

"Nothing to tell," I said.

He looked happy for the first time. "I guess," he said, sighing heavily, "there ain't nothing to do but take you in and start working you over. You'll talk all right, Blake. Jim and me are pretty good at making guys talk."

"I'll bet you are," I said. "There's just one little thing. Are you good enough to do it without leaving marks?"

"Who worries about marks?" he said. "Maybe you got in a fight with somebody before we arrested you. Or maybe you got drunk and fell down a few times."

"Uh-uh," I said. "It won't work."

"Why not?"

"I can prove," I said, "that for the past half hour I haven't left this room and that no one has entered until you did."

He knew there was more to it than that. "So?" he asked suspiciously.

"There are some photographs on the dresser," I told him. "Be sure to take a good look at the backs."

He lumbered over and picked up the prints. He thumbed through them, then looked at the backs, his face darkening to a dull purple.

"Duplicate copies have already gone to the *Plain Dealer,*" I added.

He stood there, the prints grasped in his big hands, and for a minute I wasn't sure whether he was going to rip up the pictures or attack me.

"What's the matter, Lieutenant?" the other big cop asked anxiously.

"The sonuvabitch," said the lieutenant, sounding as if he were going to choke on his own anger, "has a bunch of pictures of himself naked. From Sutton's Studio. They show all of him and give the time. The smart sonuvabitch."

I sneaked a look at the little cop who was still standing in the background. He was staring off at the wall with a blank expression, but his face had lost the sourness.

"Thanks, Lieutenant," I said. "Now let's stop acting like a bunch of small boys about to tie a tin can to a dog's tail. If you want to take a chance on booking me, go ahead. But no patty-cakes. I bruise easily."

"Maybe we could arrest him for havin' filthy pictures, huh, Lieutenant?" It was Jim Drake, the other big cop.

"Me," the lieutenant said thickly, "I'd like to kick the sonuvabitch right where it would do the most good." He looked around and his gaze settled on the little guy. "I suppose you got an idea on this, Sergeant?" He sounded nasty.

"Looks like he's got you," the little guy said. "Maybe we ought to wait until we get the lab report on the girl and on the fingerprints."

The lieutenant didn't want to wait, but he couldn't see any other way out.

"Hey, I thought of something," Jim Drake said. "Them pictures only cover him for tonight. Maybe he'll get in a fight or something tomorrow. Then we could pick him up."

The lieutenant considered that and liked it. "Yeah," he said. "He can't keep havin' new pictures taken every couple of hours." He tossed my gun over on the bed. "All right, Blake. We won't take you in—yet."

"Big of you," I said.

"But don't try leaving town," he said. "We'll be back for you."

"Don't worry," I said. "It takes more than a sweaty fly-cop to make me leave town."

His hands were getting itchy again, but he kept them under control. "You stick around," he growled, bent on having the last word. "We're saving a special seat for you in the gas chamber."

When they had gone, I slipped my gun back in its holster and poured myself another drink. Then I looked at my watch. Two in the morning was a little late to go calling, but things were happening too fast for me to wait. I had to see the redhead. I was positive now that she was the one who'd written the letter. I was equally sure that she wasn't going to be a good insurance risk until she had delivered whatever information she had. In fact, I wasn't such a good risk myself. I hadn't had much time to clean up in the cabin and it was possible that they would find some of my fingerprints around. And there was still my gun. They might guess what I'd done with it and ask the Washington cops to take a look. If they found fingerprints and uncovered my gun, I'd be halfway to the gas chamber.

There was another reason for wanting to get going. The blonde had been Ricci Menotti's wife and a tramp, but she'd gotten under my skin. I kept telling myself that she'd been just a one-night stand and that she'd gotten what girls get when they try to play too many numbers, but it didn't work. I couldn't wait to get my hands on the guy who'd pulled the trigger.

I went over and fished the redhead's key out from among my shirts where I'd stashed it when I was expecting the cops. Then I went downstairs and got into the Cadillac.

It didn't take me long to find Merlin Avenue and the number that was on a tag attached to the key. It was a small apartment house. None of the apartments was lighted up, but that didn't stop me. I parked the car and went into the building.

According to the key, she was in apartment three. I took a look at the mail boxes. If it were really her apartment, then her name was Julie Lawrence. It didn't mean anything to me.

I went upstairs and knocked on the door two or three times, but there was no answer. If I knocked any harder I'd wake up everyone else in the building, so I used the key and went in.

I closed the door and found the light switch. The redhead wasn't there, and things didn't look too promising for her. Somebody had gone through her apartment like a dog looking for fleas. Nothing had been missed. There were clothes and papers all over the floor. The bed and all the chairs had been opened with a sharp knife. Even the rug had been slit in a few places as though somebody had expected secret pockets. She'd had some pictures but they'd been ripped from the frames.

Whoever had made the mess had done a thorough job, but there was no way of telling if he'd found what he was looking for. Or if the redhead had been there while it was going on. For the moment there wasn't anything I could do but hope she was out on a late date. I turned off the light, locked up, and went down to my car.

I drove over to Old Fremont Street and parked. I was going to pay one more visit before I called it a day.

The street was really jumping. It was almost three in the morning, but the clubs were jammed and there were plenty of people moving from club to club. There was no recession so far as suckers were concerned.

The Silver Lode Club was just as busy as the rest of them. I went past the slot machines and into the main room, where the customers were standing two-deep around the roulette and dice tables. I drifted through the crowd, making my way toward the private door on the other side of the room.

I was almost there when I caught sight of a familiar bull neck. It was Harry Manners, the guy who had tried to stop me earlier that day. He'd seen me and was bearing down on me, his battered ears standing out like sails. There was no point of turning it into a race so I stopped and waited for him.

He came to a stop a few feet from me. "The wise guy," he said. "Hit me when I wasn't looking."

"Hi, Harry," I said. "What's new in the bouncing department?"

"I'm going to tear you apart," he said. "I'm going to rip you into little pieces and play marbles with what's left." He started moving slowly toward me.

"I hate to do this before breakfast," I told him. "You've heard too many bells ringing in your head."

"Save your breath, Shamus."

"Harry!" The new voice was low but it cut through the noisy room and stopped Harry as though he'd run into a wall.

"But, Boss," he said, sounding like a little boy who had just been refused a lollypop, "this is that wise-guy shamus. The one you said—"

"Beat it, Harry."

"Okay, Boss."

Harry shambled off and I turned to face the man who stood in the doorway of the private office. Ricci Menotti looked no different from when I had last seen him a year ago. Short and heavy-set, with the shoulders of a line-bucking back. Sleek black hair. Dark, sallow face that never changed expression. Only his black eyes showed the anger that always bubbled inside him. He was wearing the uniform of his business, a tuxedo cut well enough to conceal the gun I knew he wore under his left arm.

"What do you want, Blake?" he asked. His voice was soft and gentle—like a razor being stropped.

"Just paying a friendly visit," I said. "A couple of your boys came to see me today, and I was brought up to return social calls."

"Come in," he said. He stood to one side and I walked past him.

The office looked like a Hollywood set. It was all in white—white rug, white desk, white chairs and filing cabinets, white telephone.

"What do you want?" Ricci asked again.

I lit a cigarette and dropped the match on the white rug. "Your boys said you wanted me to leave town. I thought I'd check on it personally."

"I always play ball with the law," he said smoothly. "I hear they want you to stick around."

"I wondered if the lieutenant had reported yet," I said. "Too bad, Ricci."

"About what?"

"Your wife."

His expression didn't change. "She was a tramp," he said. "You can't play the field without expecting to pick up a loser. But the guy who did it won't get away."

I wondered how his blood would look on the white rug. Then I realized that wouldn't solve anything and I took a tighter grip on myself.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do," I said.

"You'll probably be around when it's all wound up."

"Sure I will," I said. "I expect to hand the police a little package of my own. How do you like to be wrapped, Ricci—gift or plain?"

Something stirred in his black eyes—a sluggish swirl of anger—but he kept it from reaching the rest of his face.

"Get out, Blake," he said tonelessly. "I haven't made up my mind about you yet so get out now and maybe I'll give you a break."

"Compound fracture?" I asked.

"The cops tell me," he said, "that you killed Valda. That could make it easy for me. I could dust you off and beat the rap even if it could be pinned on me. But maybe I'll give you a break and let the cops handle it. Maybe I'll enjoy watching you in the gas chamber. Only don't push me too far."

I grinned at him. "Just a big, fun-loving boy, aren't you, Ricci? But maybe you're losing your grip. Maybe you're afraid your boys couldn't take me and that's why you're going to let the cops make the first try."

His hand fluttered in the direction of his shoulder, his fingers playing nervously with the lapel of his coat.

"Go ahead, Ricci," I said. "Go for the gun. You'll never make it. You've been letting someone else do your gunning too long. You've gotten fat and slow. But go ahead. It's one way of saving the taxpayers a lot of money."

For a minute I thought he was going to crack. It was a long time since anyone had talked like that to Ricci Menotti, and for a minute the anger lay naked on his face. I knew he wasn't fat and slow and it might be a toss-up who would get in the first shot if he decided to do something about it. But I was gambling on his keeping control. I didn't want a showdown yet, but I did want to push him enough to get him off balance. If I could do that I'd have a better chance.

Ricci's struggle with himself was over as quickly as it had begun. His face closed over the raw emotion and his hand dropped to his side. I could feel the weakness in my knees as my own tension eased up.

"Get out," he said flatly.

"Sure," I said easily. "Pleasant dreams, Ricci."

I swung around and walked out of the office without looking back. I strolled through the gambling rooms. Harry Manners stood against the wall, watching me with the eager stare of a chained dog, but he made no move to intercept me. As I went through the bar I saw Weeper Wade and Eddie Trey. They, too, watched, bright-eyed and deadly, but they were too well trained to make a move without orders.

It was three o'clock when I finally got back to my hotel room. The bed looked pretty good. I had one shoe unlaced when the phone rang.

I thought of just letting it ring, but then I'd probably be awake the rest of the night wondering who'd been trying to reach me at three in the morning. I lifted the receiver and said hello.

"Ciro Blake?" a man asked. I didn't recognize it, but it was another of those careful voices.

"Yeah," I said.

"This is Frankie Carmel." He said it the same way the president might announce his name, as though confident that he wouldn't have to explain who he was. He didn't. I'd never met him, but I knew the name. You couldn't stir around in crime very much without knowing it. Frankie Carmel was one of the five or six men who ran crime in America. The Syndicate. Everybody knew this but no one had been able to do anything about it. It was twenty years since he'd been arrested. He'd been careful about his income tax so they hadn't gotten him on that. He'd been born in America, so they couldn't deport him like Luciano. They'd tried to get him on perjury after the crime hearings in New York, but that had flopped, too.

Frankie Carmel was big and important and deadly. I wondered what he was doing in Las Vegas. He couldn't be here on my account; I wasn't that big a thorn in the flesh of the Syndicate.

"Yeah," I said again.

"I want to see you." It sounded as though he were ordering a command performance. I didn't like it.

"Drop around some time tomorrow," I said. "It's either too late or too early for visitors—I'm not sure which."

"I just got in an hour ago," he said. "I want to see you now, Blake. Here. I'm at the Dunes." The Dunes was one of the big hotels.

"Tomorrow," I said, hoping I sounded firmer than I felt. "I like to get to bed before my carriage turns into a pumpkin. I've already had a full evening."

He laughed, but he didn't sound amused. "I'm in Suite 650," he said. "Just come on up. I want to talk to you about a murder and maybe about the guy who did it." He hung up without waiting for an answer.

I sat on the edge of the bed and cursed. He'd hooked me with that last statement and he knew it as well as I did. I laced up my shoe, shrugged into my coat, and was on my way.

The gambling rooms were still going strong in the Dunes. I saw a couple of movie stars losing their money just like the ordinary suckers as I went through the lobby to the elevators.

The fever seems to hit everyone in Las Vegas. Two of the elevator operators were matching silver dollars as I came up. They put away their coins reluctantly and stood at attention when they saw me. I stepped into the nearest elevator and the boy followed me in. I gave him the floor number.

"Been breaking the bank?" he asked as he sent the car upward.

"The only bank I'll ever break is a piggy," I said.

He laughed, jingling the silver dollars in his pocket.

"This is my lucky day," he said. "I hit the crap table for fifty bucks before I went on and I just took that elevator jockey for ten bucks."

"How about yesterday?" I asked him.

"I dropped seventy-five," he admitted. He shrugged. "It comes and goes."

"I hear tell," I said dryly as we reached the sixth floor.

I waded through the hall carpeting and found Suite 650. I knocked on the door. It swung open and I walked in.

There were two of them. The one who'd opened the door looked like what he was, the strong-arm boy. The other one was Frankie Carmel. I recognized him from pictures I'd seen. He sat looking at me over a drink. He was about fifty years old and he'd managed to grow a veneer on the way up from his own strong-arm days. If you didn't look at his eyes you might have taken him for a successful businessman.

"Hold it, Blake," the strong-arm boy said. He started to move in behind me.

"Forget it, Dan," Frankie Carmel said. "You've been seeing too many gangster movies. Blake isn't going to shoot the joint up." He laughed at his own wit.

"Thanks," I said.

He waved a hand. "It makes a guy feel lousy to have his gun lifted," he said. "This is a friendly meeting. We're going to put our cards on the table instead of our guns."

It made a nice picture of mutual trust, but I figured he was proving that he was so big he didn't have to be afraid of me. I let it ride.

"Drink?" he asked.

"Canadian Club, if you have it."

"Get it for him, Dan."

The bodyguard, who wasn't big enough to be introduced, trotted over to the corner and brought me a glass and a bottle. "You want soda?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I like it straight from the shoulder."

"No games," Frankie Carmel said, taking it the way I'd meant it. He looked me over and nodded as if he were approving of his latest shipment of heroin. "I've heard about you, Blake. That was a pretty smart move you made tonight. Having those pictures taken showing there wasn't a bruise on your body so the cops couldn't work you over and then claim it happened before they picked you up."

I was surprised and didn't try to hide it. "You get around," I said. "That only happened a couple of hours ago."

He liked the idea that I was impressed. "It was a smart move, Blake, but the best it can do is cover you for a few hours."

"I know. That's all I was expecting. Sometimes a few hours can make a lot of difference."

He nodded and came back to what I'd said before. "I get around," he said. "I was in New York at eight o'clock when I got a phone call. I climbed on a special plane and landed here an hour ago. I've been on the phone since then and I think I've got the whole picture by now."

"Eight o'clock?" I asked curiously. "Why did you get a phone call then? Nothing had happened yet."

He gave me a bleak smile. "Enough had happened to give somebody the idea that things were going wrong. He was right. You can't always wait for things to happen before you start moving."

He was right, but I was still curious about why he was in Las Vegas and why he wanted to see me. I knew there had to be more to it than the fact that I was gunning for Ricci Menotti. He was too big a wheel to come running every time an investigator got after one of his men. I decided to feed him a little more flattery and try to spur him on.

"It must be important," I said, "if it drags you out here from New York. They don't send vice presidents to sharpen pencils for the office boys."

It's funny, but a man never gets so important, on either side of the fence, but what he still likes to have someone acknowledge it. Frankie Carmel was no exception.

"Yeah," he said. "Blake, I got a little story to tell you. No names. Just a story like you were at the movies."

I lit a cigarette. "I'm sitting in the loge. Let it roll."

"Suppose," he said, "there's a guy who's a private cop, only sometimes he works for a Congressional committee. Then he gets loaned to a state and he's told to go get a guy who everybody thinks is one of them public enemies. You follow me, Blake?"

"A very fictional situation," I said, "but I follow you."

"Now let's take a look at the guy this shamus is supposed to get. He runs a gambling club which is legit. Notice I said he runs it. He don't own it. Then let's say he fronts for a bunch of businessmen on some other things which we won't bother mentioning. When you take in everything, there's a lot of dough involved. Maybe several million dollars a year. You get the picture?"

I nodded.

"This guy," he said, "is married to a broad. A beautiful broad, only she's got urges this guy can't take care of. Maybe nobody could with this dame. I know a lot of guys who tried, but it didn't seem to help much." He grinned briefly. "This broad gets around so much she makes the United Nations look like a one-man outfit. And the guy is getting a stiff neck from trying to see who's dipping into his well. Maybe you've known a few broads like this."

When he first started talking about Valda I could feel the anger pushing up inside me, but I kept it down out of sight. I was willing to grant that she'd been a tramp, but I kept thinking it had been different with me. I kept remembering the way she had talked about herself and I had an idea that she'd been trying to tell me it was different.

I shook off the memory and nodded. I thought it was better not to speak until I was sure that my voice wouldn't give me away.

"This guy," Frankie went on, "knows his wife is a pushover but he ain't ever actually caught her. This is enough to keep him from doing anything. Besides, he still goes for her himself. But he's so busy trying to watch her that he ain't always as careful about business as he used to be. The guys he works for begin to worry about him."

So that was it, I thought. Ricci Menotti was the reason Frankie was in Las Vegas.

"Now we get back to this shamus," Frankie said with a grin. "He's after this guy because some dame wrote a letter offering to do some talking. She'll meet the shamus and tell all. But the shamus ain't got no name for her and never saw her. This much the other guy finds out, from one of his connections. So he decides to use his wife as a trap for the shamus. The way it is to go is that the wife shows up as the broad with the information. She's to get the shamus to meet her at a cabin out in the country because it ain't safe in town. When she's out there with him, she's to feed him a mickey in a drink. When he's out, she's going to partly undress him, then slip into something comfortable and stretch out beside him. A nice friendly scene. Get it?"

"Yeah," I said. My throat was so dry I wasn't sure I'd get the word out.

"The husband knows how much time all this will take, and he's going to call the cops and say his wife hasn't come back from the cabin, where she's gone alone, and will they check. They check and find the picture above. Of course, the cops like the husband so they see to it that the wife don't get no free publicity. But the shamus don't look so good now. He's been found in bed with the wife of the guy he's supposed to get. The state committee'll probably drop him before he knows what's going on. Any way it falls, the shamus will be smart to pack up and leave town. He's through."

"Yeah," I said again. He was right. It hadn't been any brilliant plan, but it had been good enough to work. "Something went wrong?"

"It sure as hell did," he said. "From here on in, Blake, I got to guess about how the story goes. All I know is that the husband of this broad started changing things at the last minute. Instead of just calmly waiting until it was time to call the cops, he said something about checking to see that the frame went right and that he'd maybe call the cops a little later. That's when I got the phone call. Then I know that the cops did get called much later than they were supposed to be and when they got their call it was just an unidentified voice that said they ought to take a look in the cabin. The rest I've got is guesses."

"Maybe the guy in the story could fill it in," I said.

"Maybe," Frankie agreed. "Maybe if he were asked he'd say he changed his mind about going out to check up and that he was nervous about the whole thing and just forgot to make the phone call the way he'd said he would. He might be a little careful about what he says if he made the mistake of putting his own business first."

"People can get hurt that way," I murmured.

"Yeah. But here's the way I make it. Maybe the broad liked the looks of the shamus when she made the first contact. She'd be afraid not to go through with the frame, but maybe she decided to get something out of it first. And maybe her husband got an idea. I don't know how. Maybe he saw her using a little extra perfume or maybe her eyes got a little brighter. You know how it is with a dame on the prowl."

"Yeah."

"Suppose the guy follows the skirt and the shamus out to the cabin and he's watching through a window while they're having fun and games. Now he's finally caught her in the act. He's a hot-headed guy and he's got to do something about it. He wants to bump them both and he gets an idea. After the shamus has had the mickey, he goes in and uses the shamus' gun to kill the broad. Then he goes out and calls the cops. And it looks like he's in. He's fixed the broad for doubling up on him and he's hung it on the guy." He took a long sip from his glass. "What do you think of my story, Blake?"

I swallowed some of the stiffness in my throat. "It's a pretty good story," I said, "but I don't think Hollywood will buy it. You've killed off the only romantic interest, and the shamus is still up the creek."

"That's the way it goes some days," he said. He took another drink and stared at me thoughtfully. "Maybe the shamus wouldn't have to stay up the creek."

I had a hunch about what was coming. I knew there'd be strings to it, but if I didn't take it, strings and all, I'd be in an even worse spot. I managed to look interested.

"Now you're coming to the part of the story I like," I said.

He took another long count. "To hell with the story," he said finally. "Let's talk about you and me. You know who I represent?"

"Sure."

"Then you know I'm not just talking to hear myself blow. Aside from what the cops might do to you, I'd hate to see anything happen to you, Blake."

"I'm touched," I said lightly.

His eyes hardened. "Don't try to whistle it off," he said. "I know you're tough, Blake, but we're tougher. Don't forget it."

"It sounds to me like you're trying to push that shamus farther up the creek instead of helping him find paddles."

He relaxed enough to grin, but he was only exercising his muscles. "What's your job in Las Vegas, Blake?"

"I thought you knew everything," I said.

"Maybe I want to know more," he grunted. "Are you here to get Ricci Menotti? Or is it your idea to get everybody connected with Ricci and upset everything he's been working on?"

"I'm not that big a boy," I said truthfully. "You seem to know about the anonymous letter the Nevada committee got. It promised information on Ricci Menotti. That's all. I was sent down to get it." I didn't bother mentioning that it also concerned George Holland, the special D.A. He didn't seem to know that much and I wasn't going to play Santa Claus.

"You see the girl who wrote the real letter yet?" he asked. Something in his voice made me feel a little better about the redhead; they'd gone through her apartment, but if they had done anything to her he wouldn't have cared whether I'd seen her or not.

"I've been a little busy," I said.

He laughed. "I like the way you work, Blake. I'd like it better if you were working with us—but they tell me you can't be bought." He made it sound like a question without being one.

"Money goes to my head," I said. "I never touch the stuff."

"Okay. That's the way it is. I like you, but that's not why I wouldn't like to have anything happen to you. It's just good business. You and your committees can't put us out of business, but if anything happened to you it could cost us a lot of dough. If you get Ricci Menotti, you'll leave town?"

"*When* I get Ricci I'll leave town."

"Maybe we can make a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

He shifted on the chair. "We don't like it when a guy puts our business in danger to do something for himself. Suppose we hand Ricci to you?"

My hunch had been right. This was why Frankie Carmel was in Las Vegas. Ricci had stepped out of line and one way or another they were going to handle him for it.

If they could do it and get rid of me at the same time, they'd probably think they had a good bargain.

"You mean you'd hand your number one man here over to the law?" I asked.

"Ricci's not number one," he said dryly. "He never was, but right now he's number zero. What about it, Blake?"

"How will you work it?" I asked. I was stalling because I knew that somewhere there was going to be a string that would make me say no.

"Ricci Menotti," he said, "killed his wife and tried to hang the frame on you. We give him to you with it all wrapped up—maybe even with a confession. How we do it is our business. You turn Ricci over to the D.A. or your state committee. Everybody's happy. You've gotten the man you came to get and we're in the clear. Simple."

Well, this was the end of the line. I couldn't stall any longer. I had to start cooking or take the pot off.

"There's only one thing wrong with it," I said slowly.

His face tightened up. "What?"

"My job," I said, "is to get Ricci with evidence that he's in the rackets. Not to prove who's behind him or hand them a way of drying up everything, but they still want Ricci on a rackets charge—not a murder charge. They might welcome the murder angle if it were in addition to something else. But they won't like it if the murder is the only thing."

He made a suggestion about what the committee could do.

"They didn't hire me for that either," I said.

He didn't even grin, so I knew the honeymoon was over. But I still had to try to do one thing. If I could convince him that the Syndicate should stay neutral and let me and Ricci fight it out, I'd have an even chance. I was sure they wouldn't help Ricci, but I didn't want them thinking I was in the way. If they did, I might as well make out my will.

"It's no good, Frankie," I said. "For either of us."

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose you hand Ricci to me on the murder charge," I said. "I'm through and go back to Washington. But the committee knows that Ricci was mixed up in some rackets and that I fell down on the job. So they hire another guy and start watching whoever steps into Ricci's shoes. I'll grant you that if I get Ricci on one of his connections it's going to cost you money, but the other way is liable to cost you a lot more."

He was thinking it over, but that was all I could tell.

"Look at it this way," I said. "Let's say we're thinking of another story. Suppose Ricci is in charge of some dope operations. Maybe some dope comes into the country across the Pacific. Maybe Ricci's the guy who sees that it's spread out to other contacts across the country. If I got him on that it might cost somebody some money, but that and the murder would be enough on Ricci to make everybody happy. Nobody said I was supposed to find out where Ricci got the stuff or where he sent it. They just want him." I was trying to give him the idea I wouldn't look any further, which wasn't strictly true, but it had to be something like that.

"You'd bring Ricci in yourself?" he asked. "Or just turn it all over to the cops?"

"I'd bring him in myself. Then my job would be over."

He nodded, and there was a shrewd look in his eyes. "If you go after Ricci with two charges like that, you know he ain't just going to throw up his hand. There's going to be something in it."

"The idea had occurred to me," I admitted. "I think maybe I can shoot quicker."

"Ricci would have trouble talking if you did," he said. He was almost talking to himself. He didn't carry it any further, but I knew what he was thinking as clearly as if he'd said it out loud. He was thinking that maybe in a showdown Ricci and I might kill each other and that would really clean it up. It was even possible he was thinking of the possibility of helping us.

"I'm going to level with you, Frankie," I said. I bore down on the old sincerity. "I'm supposed to get one other person along with Ricci. But that's all."

"Who?"

"George Holland." I knew I was taking a chance, but I was gambling on Holland not being important. If he weren't, Frankie might be convinced I was putting all the cards on the table.

He nodded slowly, still thinking it over. "Ricci has always lined up some of his own men. Holland is one of them."

I leaned back and tried to look relaxed while he rolled it over in his mind. I'd made my pitch; now I had to wait to see what he was going to do with it.

"Suppose," he asked finally, "I was to say maybe—what would you expect from me?"

"Nothing," I said promptly. "And I mean nothing. You stay in the audience. If I start after you, you don't need my permission to do something about it." He grinned at that. "But if I don't, you just stay there, sitting on your hands."

"You're taking a big bite, Blake," he said. "This guy Holland, Weeper Wade and Eddie Trey, a couple of local cops—they're all on Ricci's personal payroll. I can't tell him to go easy on you because that would tip things."

"I'll take it the way it comes," I said.

He nodded to himself, and I went on reading his mind. He was thinking that Ricci might kill me and he could still be thrown to the wolves afterward and the Syndicate's skirts kept clean. Or if Ricci didn't kill me, he could have somebody step in at the last minute and be sure that Ricci and I canceled each other out. The way he was seeing it, he liked it.

"All right, Blake," he said suddenly. "Only don't try for a bigger bite. You might break a tooth."

"Not me," I said. "I like living too much."

"Remember that," he said quietly. "Thanks for dropping over, Blake." I was being dismissed.

"The pleasure was all mine," I said. I tossed off the rest of the Canadian Club and stood up. The strong-arm boy was already across the room, holding the door open for me. I headed for it. His voice stopped me halfway through.

"Yeah?"

"You know me?"

"I know you," I said.

"Okay. I'm going to stick around Las Vegas a few days. I need a vacation. I wouldn't like it if I had to go back to work in the middle of it."

"I'm against work myself," I said lightly. "Just hang your holster in the back room and relax. I'll send the girls over later."

"Okay," he said. He looked at me and laughed. "No blondes, though."

"No blondes," I agreed soberly.

It was five o'clock when I finally got back in my hotel room. This time I remembered to tell the operator I didn't want any calls put through. I got undressed and tumbled into bed. It had been a long day.

CHAPTER 4

It was almost noon when I finally woke up. I had a bad taste in my mouth and I was still tired, but I fought the desire to go back to sleep. I knew I didn't have too much time. I could expect those cops to be back some time soon. And there were things to be done.

I shaved and showered. Even after the shower, it seemed to me that I could smell the blonde's perfume on my shoulder. That memory was something the sleep hadn't fixed up. I told myself I was an idiot and went down and had some breakfast.

After eating, I checked with the operator. There had been several calls. Jay Crowley had called three times. Big Joe Hennessey had called once. So had some woman who didn't identify herself. Probably the redhead, I guessed.

I drove the Cadillac over to the *Plain Dealer* offices and went in to see Jay Crowley. He looked like he was working up a first-class nervous breakdown.

"Where the hell have you been?" he said as I came in. "I called you twice last night after two, and three times this morning. I was just about to get in touch with the governor and demand a search for you."

"I was busy last night," I said. "This morning I was sleeping. Relax, Jay; stop putting out a five-star extra every ten minutes."

He grinned and rubbed one hand over his face. He looked tired. "Sorry, Ciro," he said. "I was worried about you and I guess, too, I was hoping you could give me some dope on the murder."

"What have you got so far?" I asked.

"This," he said. He tossed over the early edition of his paper.

The murder was all over the upper half of the first page, and half of it was in pictures. It gave me a wrench to see her smiling out from the ink. It didn't take long to read the story. The way the police had given it out, Valda Menotti had been assaulted and murdered by the usual person unknown, but they were promising an early arrest. There was a hint that the murderer might be someone who was after her husband, but that was the only reference.

"What do you know about it?" Jay asked as I tossed the paper down on his desk.

"Not much more than you do," I said, "except that she was shot with my gun and I'm the guy the cops are expecting to arrest at an early date."

He gaped at me a moment while it soaked in. "But why?" he asked. One finger stabbed at the paper. "And what's this business about her being raped?"

I grinned, but my heart wasn't in it. "Just between friends," I said, "there were some intimate moments, but nobody was forced into anything."

"Hell," he said. "So that's why you were sounding like you'd been sandbagged last night when I said your description sounded like Valda Menotti. And when I told you the rumors were that she'd been shacking up with Big Joe Hennessey—"

"It was a surprise," I admitted. "You can't use any of this, but part of it was a frame and part of it wasn't. Because of the part that wasn't, she was killed." I sketched in the rest of it for him.

"Ricci killed her?" he asked.

"I'm sure of it," I said. "But proving it is another thing." I told him about my talk with Frankie Carmel.

He whistled softly. "So the Syndicate is going to unload Ricci? That ought to make your job easier."

"Maybe," I said, "maybe not. Frankie's going to expect me to wear blinkers so I don't see anything but Ricci. If the blinkers slip, Frankie will stop being a bystander." I didn't bother to add that I was sure that Frankie had the idea of getting rid of Ricci and me both in one clean sweep.

"I had to run a newspaper," he said, "so I can listen to things I can't publish." He shuffled the papers on his desk and came up with a glossy print. "Speaking of things

I can't use, what the hell was the idea of sending me these strip-tease pictures of yourself?"

"Insurance," I said.

His eyebrows went up. "I didn't know they were selling *that* kind of policy."

I told him about the cops and the stay of execution the pictures had given me.

"I know Lieutenant Baker," Jay said. "There's a gag around town that he stops by the Silver Lode every morning so that Ricci Menotti can pin his badge on him. You don't think he's going to leave you alone just because of those pictures?"

I shook my head. "They'll be around some time today. In the meantime, I put a little more pressure on Ricci and I had a talk with Frankie Carmel that I might have missed. And I can make some arrangements with you."

"What kind?"

"I'll keep checking with you about every three hours. If you don't hear from me, you'll know the cops have me and you can send around a mouthpiece."

Some of the tension left his face. "That's more like it," he said. "I was afraid you were going to be stubborn and insist on doing everything yourself."

"That much you can do for me, but don't start getting ideas about helping me in other ways."

"Why not?" He sounded like a boy being told to stay out of the jam jar.

"You have to live here, for one reason. I don't. I'll back you against anybody, Jay, when it comes to using words. But the range here is too far for printers' ink."

He looked as if he might try to put up an argument.

"I might also mention that you have a very lovely wife," I said, "and these boys play rough."

That got him. "All right, all right," he said. "I'll stay here and swivel around in my chair and get you a lawyer if you need one. I guess Big Joe might be the best bet since he knows why you're here."

"Hennessey? He's a lawyer?"

"Used to be. He's still got the right to practice even though he's retired."

"Okay," I said. "From what I've seen of him, Big Joe would be a good guy to have in my corner. I'll be seeing you, Jay."

As I stood up, he stopped me with a gesture. "What's your plan, Ciro?"

"Who's got a plan?" I said lightly. "I'm no big brain who goes around picking up old threads and then figures out that the murderer is a blue-eyed half-wit who limps. I've only got one way of operating. I'm going to try to keep Ricci and his friends off balance, and if I can do that one of them will crack pretty soon. That's about all there is to it—that and keeping a gun handy."

"But you must have some idea what you're going to do. Did you see the girl yet?"

" 'Friend'?" I said. "I got a fast glimpse of her yesterday evening, but that was when I thought she was phony and Valda was the real one. I stopped by at her apartment later but she wasn't there. I'll try to catch her some time today. I thought I'd drop out and see Big Joe and then maybe I'll do a little pushing."

"How?"

"I'm going to see George Holland. That would be the natural thing to do if I didn't suspect him, but while I'm there maybe I'll make him a little nervous. After that, I thought I might try a guy named Eddie Trey. He's nervous already, so maybe I can start something crumbling."

"Eddie Trey? One of Ricci's gunmen?"

"The same."

Jay Crowley had the weight of the world back on his shoulders. "But what can you do with him?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I told you it's just a question of pushing, but I have to play it by ear. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But usually it does. Want me to autograph those pictures before I leave?"

That dragged a weak grin out of him, and I left before he could start worrying again. I liked Jay but he hadn't changed from the way he'd been the year before. He was always expecting me to come up with a master plan and I could never make him understand that I worked with a license and a gun the way another guy works with a pick and shovel.

The next stop was Big Joe Hennessey's. I drove up in front of the house and then I took a minute before climbing out of the car. I didn't have to see Big Joe, but I'd decided I'd better know how he was feeling. The rumor was that Valda had been his girl friend. I wanted to know if he knew I'd been picked for the star part of her murder, and if so how he was taking it. Maybe he'd believe the cops. If he did I'd better tell Jay to get me another lawyer when I needed one.

I had to wait a while, but the butler finally showed me into the study. The ex-senator was sitting behind the desk. He looked a little older and his mouth was clamped down a little harder, but that was all. It was enough to tell me he'd been hit hard by the blonde's death. I wondered if there were anybody she hadn't made punchy.

"What do you want, Blake?" he asked gruffly.

"Not much," I said. "I had a pretty busy day yesterday after I left you and I thought you might like to hear about it."

He waved me to a chair. Then he pushed a decanter and glass across the desk to me. It was bourbon, but I decided it was no time to be fussy.

"You know about Valda Menotti?" I asked.

"Yes," he said heavily.

"You also know the local cops have nominated me for the gas chamber?"

He hesitated, then nodded.

I took a deep breath and decided to take the first hurdle. "Do you think I did it?"

He hesitated a little longer, but when the answer came it was another shake of his head.

"I may get picked up by the cops today," I said. "I expect to keep in touch with a friend of mine, Jay Crowley. If he doesn't hear from me, he's going to get in touch with you either to bail me out or make them put the charge against me."

"All right," he said. He swiveled his chair around and stared out through the window at the patio and swimming pool. Then abruptly he swung back and looked directly at me. "You met Valda here yesterday, didn't you?" he asked.

"You introduced her to me," I said, "but you only used her first name. I didn't know she was Ricci Menotti's wife. Later she showed up and claimed to be the woman who wrote that letter to the committee, but she still didn't tell me her last name. I didn't know who she was until after she was dead."

His face didn't show anything at the piece of information I'd slipped in. It reaffirmed something I'd learned from working with a Congressional committee: never play poker with a politician.

"Claimed to be?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Another girl wrote it. She was strictly a decoy."

He swung around and stared out of the window again. "Valda Menotti," he said, "has been a friend of mine for a long time. I thought that she had no sympathy with her husband's business. Maybe I was wrong."

"Or maybe she was frightened," I said.

"Maybe," he agreed. "Tell me about last night."

I gave him the story, starting with Valda's arrival at my room and ending with the cops. I left out the intimate details, but I had an idea he guessed them from the way he looked at me. Maybe it was just that he knew her well enough to know how it had to happen. The story of the photographs finally made him smile.

"That was fast thinking, son," he said, "but you were lucky."

"How lucky?"

"You used the Sutton Studios?"

"Yeah."

"Sutton isn't one of Menotti's men exactly, but he'd jump through hoops to make Menotti happy. If he'd been around, your pictures would never have been delivered. What next?"

I shrugged. "I only know one way to work—keep pushing until somebody falls over. If you keep a guy off balance, sooner or later he'll make a mistake."

"How do you figure it?" he asked. "You think it started out as a straight frame on you, but somewhere along the line Menotti got other ideas; maybe he followed Valda out to the cabin and kept an eye on things through the window—" he was very carefully not looking at me—"and then decided to kill her when you were knocked out?"

The thing that was almost tangible there in the room was what wasn't being said. I decided the old boy was a hell of a guy. If I'd been in his place, I would've wanted to swing on somebody. Even as it was, knowing her for only a couple of hours, I felt like swinging every time I heard some reference to her round heels.

"Maybe," I said. I wanted to get past that part of it quickly. "I'm convinced that Ricci killed her, but I'm not so sure it can be proved so easily. And I don't think it solves much, anyway. I'd still rather get him on something else and save the murder charge for a hole card."

He nodded. "You'll have to move fast. You know that, don't you?"

I knew it but I wanted to hear his reasons. "Why?"

"If they pull you in and slap the murder charge on you," he said, "some of this will start hitting the papers. And there'll be a lot to be read in between the lines. The state committee will start making noises like they never heard of you. Even Washington will start pretending they don't know you. Politicians are like that, son. They're as skittish as an old maid who's been asked to join a daisy chain."

"Yeah," I said.

"I think there's another reason," he said. "It is my personal opinion that Menotti is not completely sane. If things don't go his way fast, he might crack. Then it could start getting messy."

"It's messy already."

I caught a glimpse of the pain in his eyes. Then it was concealed. "True," he said. "You said there was another girl who claimed she'd written the letter to the committee. You talk to her?"

"Not yet. I expect to before the day is over. Maybe I'll be in a better spot then. I'll keep you posted."

"Do that," he said. He waited until I reached the door before he spoke again. "Better go easy, son. You seem to have a talent for getting in trouble with blondes."

"Yeah," I said and went on out. But I was doing another slow burn. Why had he made that crack? I had met only one blonde in Las Vegas. I was in trouble over that, but it had caused her even more trouble. She was dead. So why the plural? Maybe the old boy had been trying to make a joke instead of saying what he really thought about my messing around with Valda, the way people will laugh when they really feel like fighting or running. Maybe he had a right to make bum jokes if he wanted to. I cooled off.

I drove back to Las Vegas and parked the Cadillac. It was late enough in the afternoon for the lunch hour to be over. I checked with Jay and then went up to the offices of Special District Attorney George Holland. I walked into the reception room and up to the desk and stopped—stopped short as though I'd run into a brick wall.

She was wearing glasses, and the clothes weren't nearly as revealing as they'd been the night before, but it was the redhead. She was Holland's secretary or receptionist, or both.

She looked up and recognized me and I could see the fear flood into her eyes. There was nothing phony about that so I wiped the recognition off my own face.

"Mr. Holland, please," I said as formally as I could.

It took her a minute to speak, but the fear slowly receded. She licked her lips nervously. "Who's calling?" she asked finally.

"Tell him Ciro Blake."

She flipped the key on her interoffice box and announced my name. There was a moment of silence, then I could hear him tell her to send me in.

He met me at the door, all grin and good cheer. George Holland was easily thirty-five but he still looked like an up-and-comer just out of college. He had an open, friendly face, and it was hard to look at it and think he was mixed up with anything like Ricci Menotti. But he was nervous. He pumped my hand a little too hard and he was making too much with the old friend stuff as he led me into the office. I decided that the letter had been right.

"Never thought I'd see you back here," he said as he steered me to a chair. "Cigarette? Drink?"

I'm not proud; I'll drink any man's whisky, so I let him pour me a drink. I even let him make a nervous toast to the team that had cleared up Las Vegas the year before.

"Well," he said—it was about the tenth time he'd said that one word—"what *are* you doing back in town? A vacation?"

"No," I said. "Just checking up a little."

His face tightened. He certainly knew that I was there to get Ricci Menotti and he probably suspected I'd be willing to take him, too, but I don't think he had expected me to come right out with it. And he had to play it as if he didn't know anything.

"For the Congressional committee?" he asked.

"No."

"On your own?"

"Not exactly," I said with a grin.

"Being pretty damn secretive, aren't you?" he asked.

"Even the walls have ears," I said lightly.

"Not in the District Attorney's office," he said. "Aren't you going to work with me on it? If there's any prosecution . . ."

"Sure, I'm going to work with you," I said. I gave him another grin, but that's all I was giving just then.

There was a moment of silence while he waited for me to go on. Then he realized I wasn't going anywhere. "What're you digging for?" he asked.

"Nothing special," I said. "Just looking around."

He decided to take the bit in his teeth. "Ricci Menotti?" he asked.

"Could be," I said.

He stared off at the wall and tried to give the picture of a man thinking. It wasn't too successful. Hollywood didn't lose anything when he took up law.

"I think you're making a mistake, Blake," he said eventually. He was being as sincere as all hell. "When I took this job I agreed with you that Menotti was mixed up in the rackets. But I've been around here a year now. Oh, I'll grant you he isn't the most desirable citizen—I don't suppose any gambler is—but I don't think he's the hood you have him pegged for. Maybe just a little mixed up so he thinks he has to act tough."

"Sweet, lovable old Ricci," I said.

He flushed. "Besides, I wouldn't bother him right now, if I were you. He's just lost his wife. Maybe you've heard?" He tried to look piously solemn, but succeeded only in looking as though he had indigestion.

"I've heard," I said.

"A shocking thing," Holland said, shaking his head. "But I believe the police expect to have the murderer very soon."

"Lieutenant Baker does, at least," I said. I stood up and looked around the office. "Well, George, I just dropped in to say hello. Looks like you've been doing pretty well."

"You know how it is," he said. "State's attorneys don't get rich."

"Usually they don't," I said. "But then they can't all have the same opportunities. See you around, George."

By now the strain was beginning to make him sweat a little, but he managed to keep up appearances. "Drop in any time," he said heartily.

I opened the door and went out. In the outer office, I glanced at the redhead. She was looking at me, and I thought there was a mute appeal in her eyes. Then her gaze dropped to her desk. I followed it and saw a small square of paper on the very edge of the desk. I swerved closer and scooped it up as I went by.

When I was outside and a safe distance from the building, I unfolded the paper. A brief note had been hastily scribbled on it in pencil: "I must see you tonight," it read. "I'll be home all evening. Please come." There was no signature.

I would have liked to go back to the hotel and knock off a nap, but I had a hunch it might be better to stay away. I knew it was only a question of time, but I wanted to get in one more lick before they picked me up.

Ten dollars' worth of quarters helped me kill a couple of hours at the dice table in one of the small clubs. The afternoon was the time for the small betters, so the stickman didn't pay any attention to me. When the last quarter was gone, I went out and found a quiet restaurant and had my dinner. Finally, just as it was starting to get dark, I decided it was time to make my move. I went to a public phone booth and dialed the Silver Lode.

"Eddie Trey," I said to the voice that answered.

I had to wait about ten minutes, but finally there was another voice on the phone. I recognized it as belonging to the younger of the two gunmen who had been to see me the day before.

"Eddie?" I asked.

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"An old friend. From the East. No names on the phone. I want to see you."

"Yeah?"

"I picked up something that'll interest you. You're being played for a pigeon, Eddie."

"So?" His voice sounded tighter.

"You know Frankie?" I asked. "Got in town last night."

"Yeah."

"I got it straight. You're being set up for the one-two. I'll slip you the whole thing. Tell you what. You know the parking lot a block below the club?"

"I know it."

"I got a car parked there. I'll be in it fifteen minutes from now. You come down. When I see you, I'll blink the lights twice. You come back to the car and we'll talk."

"Okay," he said and hung up.

I was pretty sure he'd show. Guys like Eddie Trey are always expecting the double cross. He'd want to know about it. Once he saw me, he'd be expecting it from me, too. But I might be able to crack him enough. A little crack in Eddie might help to put a big one in Ricci Menotti.

I checked in with Jay Crowley again. He was ready to leave his office and had just been waiting for my call. Then I went down to the parking lot where I had the Cadillac.

In about ten minutes a man came walking down the street and stopped at the entrance to the parking lot. The light was too dim to be sure, but it looked like Eddie. I blinked the lights twice. The man stood there for another moment and then walked on. I cursed to myself and went back to waiting.

I didn't have to wait long. Suddenly the front doors on either side of the car jerked open and they were there. There wasn't much light, but there was enough to show both guns. It hadn't worked out quite the way I'd planned it.

"My old pal from the East," Eddie Trey said viciously. "Sonuvabitch."

"You shouldn't've done it, Ciro," Weeper Wade said in that sad voice of his. "Eddie ain't no punk to fall for a gag like that."

"So it seemed like a good idea at the time," I said. I was still trying to figure out where it had gone wrong. Unless he'd recognized my voice, I couldn't think of anything that might have tipped him off.

"I thought you wanted to talk," Eddie said, jabbing me in the ribs with the gun. "Who's setting me up as a pigeon besides you, wise guy?"

"Talk was the idea," I said. I was being careful not to move. Eddie was trigger happy. "Ricci's paying more attention to his own business than he is to the Syndicate. That's setting you up as a pigeon. You, too, Weeper. You ought to get out from under."

"I ought to blast your guts out," Eddie said. "That's what I ought to do."

"Easy," Weeper said. "The boss don't want him blasted."

"I'm sure he doesn't," I said. "He's saving me for bigger things. Well, I tried to do you a favor, Eddie. If you don't want it, we'll forget the whole thing and I'll run along." That was certainly wishful thinking.

"You ain't running no place yet," Eddie said. He jabbed me with the gun again.

"Eddie's right," Weeper said sadly. He reached over and snaked my gun out of the holster. "Eddie and me have been looking for you all afternoon, Ciro. It was nice of you to make it so easy for us."

"Move over, sucker," Eddie said. The gun prodded my ribs again.

I slid over on the seat and Eddie slipped in under the wheel. He kept his gun on me while Weeper opened the back door and climbed in behind me. Then he put his gun away and started the car.

"Don't think I don't appreciate the service," I said dryly, "but I'm quite capable of getting home alone."

"You ain't going home," Eddie said, swinging the car up Fremont.

I suddenly remembered what Big Joe had said about Ricci's sanity and wondered if he'd suddenly decided to have me killed and to hell with everything. The idea wasn't comforting.

"I had a long talk with Frankie Carmel last night," I said, trying to sound casual. "He thinks that any attempt to kill me would be bad for business. Maybe you ought to check with him before we take this ride."

Eddie made a wordless sound in his throat.

"You got us all wrong, Ciro," Weeper Wade said from behind me. "Nobody's going to bump you."

"Yet," Eddie added.

"That'll make my insurance company happy," I said. "What are we going to do, or am I being too eager?"

Eddie swung right on Main Street. "We're just going to get a little fresh air, Copper. Every time we get near you, it starts to stink."

"Maybe you're using the wrong kind of deodorant," I suggested.

"Just don't crack wise," he said. "Just don't start it, Copper."

"You shouldn't ride Eddie like that," Weeper said. "We just got our job to do."

"And it's a pleasure," Eddie added.

The conversation wasn't getting me anywhere so I let it lag for the time. Pretty soon we swung left again. On Bonanza Road. This was Route 95, which led to Reno. When we swung right again, on Rancho Road, I knew we were heading out of town.

"Don't forget," I said, "the police don't want me to leave town. They made it very clear they would be broken-hearted if I did."

Eddie had a suggestion about the police, too, and for once I was in agreement with him.

"We're doing the cops a favor," Weeper said. "We're real law-abiding, me and Eddie. They're going to love us."

"Eddie," Weeper said, his voice suddenly sharper, "I think somebody's following us."

"I'll lose them," Eddie said. "This crate ought to be able to do it."

"No," Weeper said. "Maybe there ain't nothing to it, and it might look suspicious if we start running. We're going to turn off pretty soon and take that back road to Red Rock Canyon. Then we can tell if anybody is following us. If he is, you can still lose him."

"Okay," Eddie said.

We rode along at a steady forty. There were plenty of cars on the road and I began to lose the hope I'd felt when Weeper first said he thought someone was following. The more I thought about it, the less chance there seemed to be. Nobody knew where I was. Jay Crowley wouldn't start worrying about me until another three hours were up.

Eddie swung the car to the left, onto a narrow road twisting through the scattered hills. We all waited tensely, wondering what the other car would do.

"False alarm," Weeper said finally. "He went right on by without even slowing down. I must be getting jumpy in my old age."

"It's the company you keep," I said.

"Shut up," Eddie said. "All you've done is run off at the mouth since we picked you up. Now shut up."

I suspected it was good advice so I took it. We drove along for another good seven or eight miles without seeing another car. We were probably no more than twenty minutes from Las Vegas, but we might as well have been out in the middle of Death Valley. Off to the left the lights of the town threw a soft glow against the sky, but that was the only sign of civilization. The three of us were completely alone.

"This ought to do," Eddie said. He pulled the Cadillac off the road onto a strip of flat ground and shut off the motor. "We can see a good five miles in both directions."

"Looks all right," Weeper agreed.

"All right, Copper," Eddie said. "Open the door and get out. But don't make any fast moves."

I swung the door open. "Hardly looks like a convivial spot," I said. "I don't think you ought to bring me here when we're not going steady."

"Always with the gags," Eddie snarled. He shoved me. "Get out. I feel like some exercise."

I got out and stood beside the car. Eddie slid out after me and Weeper climbed out of the back.

"Exercise?" I said. "Do you mind if I just watch?"

"It's like I was telling you," Weeper said mournfully. "We're doing them cops a favor. They was unhappy last night because you weren't marked up a little so they could question you without getting into trouble. We don't like to see them cops unhappy, so we're going to fix it for them."

"Maybe," Eddie said, "when we're through with you and then the cops finish with you, you'll be smart enough not to bother Ricci any more."

"You got it all wrong, Eddie," Weeper said. "He ain't got to smarten up at all. They tell me when a guy sits in that chair in the gas chamber he don't ever bother anybody again."

So that was it. Ricci wanted to try to take himself off the hook by getting me for the murder, but he also wanted to be sure that I was mussed up before. I couldn't see any way out of it. The moon was bright enough to make me a swell target; I was sure Weeper would pick me off if I tried to make a break for it.

"Who's going to do it?" I asked.

"Me," Eddie said with pleasure. He'd taken off his coat and was looking at me with anticipation.

"You think you're up to it?" I asked. I was trying to make him angry enough to be careless.

"I'm up to it," he said. He stared at me some more. "Tell me, Copper, how was it with that blonde broad before you killed her? I only had her once, but she was real lively."

In a way it was funny. I'd had some idea of getting him angry; now it had bounced back the other way. I felt the anger welling up in my throat and I thought, to hell with it. If I were going to be beaten up, I might as well get something out of it.

I stepped in fast and hit him. It was a hard, looping right that caught him high on the cheekbone. He hadn't expected it and was wide open. There was something very satisfying about feeling my knuckles crunch against his cheek. He staggered back and crashed into the side of the car.

For a moment he leaned there, motionless except for the rapid rise and fall of his chest. Then he came toward me again.

"That's going to make it more fun, Copper," he said hoarsely. He reached up and yanked the gun from his holster. "Put your hands down."

"Eddie," Weeper said. There was a warning in his voice.

"I ain't going to kill him," Eddie said. "But there wasn't nothing said about shooting him through the elbow if he don't do what he's told. Ever get shot through the elbow, Copper? It hurts."

I put my arms down and waited.

When he did move it was almost too fast for me. His arm lashed out and the light glinted on the barrel of the gun as it slanted in at my face. I rolled with the blow but it didn't help much. The gun slammed against the side of my face, hard enough to knock me down, and I could feel the sight ripping the skin before the whole area went numb. As I lay there a warm thread of blood wormed down my cheek.

Eddie didn't wait for me to get up. He stepped in fast, like a dancer, and kicked. I saw it coming in time to cover up the vital spots, but the toe of his shoe caught me in the ribs. Pain lanced through my side.

I rolled quickly away from him and got to my feet. He was rushing in again. I got my head out of the way of the gun, but it glanced off my shoulder. He pivoted quickly, his foot cutting into my groin. The pain flared up through my belly, sickening and deadly. As I doubled up, the gun barrel raked across my head, dropping me to the ground again. His feet took up the assault against my ribs.

The pain was almost more than I could bear, but I finally managed to roll away from his feet. I got up on one knee and faced him.

He came in again, full of confidence, the gun starting a long overhanded sweep for my head. I watched him and waited. Then just as he was on top of me, I stood up, swinging my right fist from the ground. The gun hit my shoulder, but I hardly felt it. What I did feel, with something that was almost ecstasy, was my fist crashing into his face. I could feel the cartilage in his nose crushing, the flesh twisting beneath my knuckles. There was a spurt of something warm on my hand and he fell away from me.

Then we were standing a couple of yards apart and the gun in his hand was shaking as he tried to point it at me. The blood was streaming down his face, but it didn't conceal the way his lips were drawn back from his teeth in an animal snarl.

"Just let me kill the bastard," he was saying, his breath almost sobbing. "Weeper, let me kill him."

"Eddie," Weeper said. "No killing. Anything short of that, but no killing."

Then Eddie was moving in on me again. This time he was being careful, and I didn't have a chance against that slashing gun.

After that I lost track of time. The gun barrel kept bouncing off my face, my neck, and my shoulders. Every time it hit I went down, and every time I was down he started kicking. It went on so long I was beginning to wish he would pull the trigger.

"Eddie," Weeper suddenly said. The urgency in his voice stopped the raining blows.

"Yeah?" Eddie said thickly. He was panting so hard it sounded like he'd been the one getting the beating instead of me.

"Car coming."

I raised my head and looked. A pair of headlights was sweeping along the road toward us, maybe a mile away.

"Get in the car," Weeper said. "We'll let it go past."

Eddie muttered under his breath but he didn't argue. We all moved over to the car. Eddie slid in under the wheel and held his gun on me while I climbed in. Then Weeper got in the back.

"Don't try nothing, Shamus," Eddie said hoarsely. "I can still shoot you through the elbow while Weeper takes care of the visitors."

To hell with it, I thought. I'd had about all the beating I could take. I was going to yell no matter what happened. I took a deep breath and waited. Then the car slid up beside us and stopped.

For a moment we all sat there in a paralysis of uncertainty. I tried to peer into the other car. There were two people sitting in the front seat, but I couldn't make them out. I thought the car looked familiar, but I wasn't sure.

"All right, nosy, get going," Eddie growled.

"Who are your friends, Shamus?" asked a voice from the other car. It was Frankie Carmel. I didn't know how he happened to be there, but I'd never been so glad to hear anyone in my life. For the moment, I loved him like a brother.

"I'd hardly go so far as to call them friends," I said, letting my breath out with a sigh.

There was a movement in the back seat as Weeper leaned over, peering into the other car. "Frankie?" he asked uncertainly.

"Hello, Weeper," Frankie Carmel said quietly. "What's going on here?"

"Just a job," Weeper said. I could hear the confusion in his voice. "This shamus has been getting out of line—"

"I know about the shamus," Frankie interrupted. "The cops know about him, too. Maybe it's down their street. Lay off of him. It's bad for business."

"But," Eddie said, "we got orders—"

"Shut up," Weeper said quickly. "We only got one order and that's to lay off."

Eddie didn't like it, but he knew enough to drop it. "What do we do?" he asked.

"The first thing you do is give me back my gun," I said.

I heard a soft click and I knew Weeper was taking the shells out. Then he passed the gun up to me.

"Now," I said, "get out of the car and start back to town."

"But—" Eddie began.

"Shut up," Weeper said.

They got out of the car and stood on the road between the two cars. They seemed to be waiting for Frankie to say something, but it didn't come.

"Frankie," Weeper said, "you'll give us a lift back to town?"

"It's not my car," Frankie said. He swiveled his head around to look at the driver. "You want to give them a lift back to town?"

"Not in my car," the driver said. I recognized the voice. It was Jay Crowley.

"That's the way it is, Weeper," Frankie said.

The two gunmen started to trudge away from the cars without another word.

"Ciro," Jay said anxiously, "are you all right?"

Was I all right? I hurt like hell all over. My face was cut in several places, and I could feel the dried blood—and some of it not so dry. But nothing seemed to be broken.

"Nothing that a few band-aids and a drink won't fix," I said. "It was nice of you boys to drop in. How'd you hear that I was entertaining tonight?"

"I was driving home," Jay said, "when I saw you in the car with those two men. I followed until you turned off down this road. I was sure they were up to something, but I didn't know what to do. Then I thought of going and asking Mr. Carmel to come along and use his influence." Now that it was over, he sounded nervous.

"It was blackmail," Frankie Carmel said. "He said if I didn't stop them, he was going to do a story on it and tie me in with giving them the orders. Me, I'm a good guy; I always try to get along with the newspapers." His voice was heavy with irony.

"I'll knit socks for both of you for Christmas," I said.

"Just one thing," Frankie said, his voice hardening. "Both of you. I don't want any publicity right now on the fact I'm here. That's the only reason I came, and it's the last time I pull you out of a hole, Shamus. Maybe you can push Frankie Carmel into doing something once, but don't try it again. Got it?"

"We got it," I said. I was still feeling too friendly to resent it.

"You sure you'll be all right, Ciro?" Jay asked. "Maybe you ought to stop at the hospital and have them look you over."

"I'm all right," I said. "Besides, I've got a date. I won't call you any more tonight, Jay. Go home and get some sleep. And thanks."

I started the Cadillac and swung around them. I headed back toward Rancho Road and stepped on it. When my lights picked up the two walking figures, I tramped the accelerator to the floor and headed for them. The last glimpse I had of Eddie Trey, he was going on all fours to get out of the way.

I started to laugh, but it hurt too much.

Back in Las Vegas, I found Merlin Street and drove along until I came to the redhead's address. It wasn't yet eight o'clock. She said she'd be home all evening, so she should be in. I thought of stopping in at a drugstore and getting something for my face, but I was afraid it would lead to too many questions. Maybe the redhead would have an old bottle of iodine around. I parked the car and went upstairs.

There was a sound of music from her apartment. I knocked on the door, and it opened enough for her to look out. She didn't seem to recognize me. I decided that Eddie must've done a better job than I'd realized.

"It's me," I said. "Ciro Blake. If you don't recognize me it's because I just tried out a new beauty operator and he was a little rough."

She gasped and then threw the door open. I went in.

"What—what happened to you?" she asked.

"Somebody didn't like the way I wear my face," I said. "He tried to part it on the side—only I'm not sure which side. Look, honey, if you want to be helpful, stop trying to get the story of my life. First I need a drink—a big one. Then maybe some warm water and a band-aid or two. Can do?"

"Can do," she said briskly. "Sit down." She pushed me gently into a big, overstuffed chair and vanished in the direction of the kitchen. She was back a moment later with a water glass two-thirds filled with whisky. It turned out to be Scotch, but I didn't care. It still tasted like money in the bank.

"Just stay there," she said and vanished off in the other direction. When she came back she had a bowl of water and some towels. She started to work on my face. It stung a little, but the warm water felt good.

While she was working on me, I finally got around to looking at her. She looked the way she had the first time I saw her, only more so. No glasses now. The red hair had been brushed out and fell down to her shoulders. She wore a flowing negligee of some filmy stuff, so sheer that the yardage was a total loss, if concealment was its aim. And every time she bent over to dab at my face, her nearness took away what was left of my breath.

When she'd finally finished washing my face, she came up with a box of band-aids and began sticking them on. Finally she leaned back and examined me. She giggled.

"They'll think you've been cuddling up to a buzz saw," she said, "but you look a little better."

I struggled to my feet and found a mirror. There were four adhesive strips on my face, and I couldn't see what was under them. But there were a good dozen other spots that ranged from congealed tears to purple bruises. My whole face seemed a little swollen, but it still looked like me.

"I wasn't planning on entering any beauty contests, anyway," I said. I held up my empty glass. "Another fistful will be about right."

She took the glass and went to the kitchen. This time I watched her walk. It was a pleasure. I sat down on a couch and waited for the front view to float back into sight.

She handed me the glass of whisky and curled up beside me.

"Now what happened?" she asked.

"Two of Ricci's men," I said. "They'd saved all their dances for me."

She laughed. "What do they look like?"

"Not much different than they did before," I admitted. "There were two guns on me, one being used and the other one just pointing. But at least they're walking back to town. Now I want to hear about you."

"You mean the information I have?"

"I mean you. First your name. I can't go around calling you 'A Friend,' or even 'A' if we get friendlier later on." I wanted to make sure her name matched the one I had seen on the mailbox.

She laughed again. She had a nice laugh. "I'm Julie Lawrence," she said. "And as you discovered this afternoon, I work for Mr. Holland."

"Nice for George," I grunted. "I guess that's how you happened on the proof you mentioned in your letter. What is it?"

Her expression changed; I saw the fear come back into her eyes. "I *had* some proof," she said.

"Had?"

"Yes. I waited for you last night until almost midnight. Then I decided you weren't coming and I hadn't had anything to eat, so I went out. I ran into some friends and didn't get home until almost three. While I was out, somebody had been through here and torn everything to pieces. The proof I had was gone."

So that was why she was frightened. They were on to her. I didn't blame her. After what had just happened to me, I would have been frightened, too, if I had any sense.

"I thought that might have happened," I said. "I did get here, but not until two in the morning. I used your key, and found that everything had been torn up. Which reminds me." I took the key out of my pocket and held it out to her.

She hesitated, making no move to take it from me. "Why don't you keep it," she said. "You may need a place to hide out—or I may need to be rescued." I couldn't tell whether she was meaning more than she was saying or not; I wasn't feeling very alert just then.

I slipped the key back into my pocket without asking any questions. "What was the proof you had?"

"I remember it all right," she said, "but it won't do much good just to know it. It was a note from Ricci Menotti to Mr. Holland. It said that he was expecting to move a shipment the next day, and asked Mr. Holland to pull the usual raid. That was all."

"He didn't say what the shipment was?"

She shook her head.

"What about the usual raid?"

"I looked it up in the files," she said. "I don't know how usual it was, but the next day Mr. Holland called a raid on a building owned by Mr. Menotti. It's down toward Eldorado. There were a lot of local and state policemen on the raid, but they didn't find anything."

I thought about it a minute. "It probably meant that Ricci was busy with narcotics off in the opposite direction—which still covers a lot of territory. But it would probably be a big help to Ricci if Holland pulled all the raiders off in the opposite direction. The state men, at least, are very anxious to get their fingers on Ricci."

"I've been terribly frightened since last night," she said. "What do you think they'll do?"

"Probably nothing," I said, wishing that I believed it. "They've got the note back and they're smart enough to know that your word won't mean anything. They'll probably just go ahead as if nothing had happened, and Holland will keep you in the office so he can watch you."

"You really think so?" she asked.

I nodded. "Besides, they'll probably be too busy concentrating on me for the next few days to worry about you. Any idea how they got wise to you?"

She shook her head.

"They knew about the letter," I said. "Somebody legitimately in on it tipped them off. Even last year when I was here somebody was tipping them off and we could never find out who it was. They were undoubtedly watching me from the time I arrived, and it's possible that they saw you speak to me in the bar last night. Or they knew you work for George Holland and tried your apartment on a guess. You know, they also sent a phony around to me."

She thought about that for a minute. "Was that why you were out with Valda Menotti last night?" she asked.

"So you know about that?" I grunted.

"Yes."

"I'm beginning to think everybody does," I said. "She got to me first. I had seen her earlier in the house of somebody who's on the level. I made the mistake of thinking she was on the level, too."

Silence moved in between us and lay there sluggishly.

"She was beautiful, wasn't she?" Julie asked softly.

"I suppose so," I said roughly. "I didn't think much about that." To put it more accurately, I didn't want to think about it now.

"How long have you worked for Holland?" I asked, to change the subject.

"Six months. At first I was glad to get the job—I knew he had been appointed to clean up Las Vegas after the Congressional hearings last year. But then I began to notice little things that looked peculiar. Then about a month ago I ran across the note I told you about. I didn't know what to do about it until I thought of writing that letter to the state committee."

"What were the other things you noticed?"

"Not anything important," she said. "There have been little things that made me wonder how honest Mr. Holland was, but that's all."

"Uh-huh," I said. I was disappointed. I had been depending on her, but all she had now was the same feeling that a lot of us had. I thought about the note again, wishing I could get my hands on it.

"That shipment mentioned in the note probably did refer to narcotics," I mused after a moment. "We think the Syndicate is getting a lot of narcotics out of Red China by way of Mexico and Los Angeles. The bulk of it arrives here, and then Ricci sees that it goes out to their various contacts all over the country."

"I thought that's what it might be," Julie said. She leaned closer to me. "What am I going to do, Ciro?" she said fearfully.

"Just sit tight," I told her again. "I'm pretty sure you're safe for the time being, since you're no longer in a position to do anything. It might be more dangerous to run. I'll try to keep an eye on you. And you might stumble into something else that will help to break the whole thing open. Think you can do it?"

"I'll try," she said.

I shifted my position on the couch and it hurt. I was becoming aware of my own body again. It hurt to breathe, even to blink. I leaned my head back against the couch and closed my eyes.

"Poor Ciro," she said softly. I felt her move, and the warmth of her body crept through my clothes. "You need to forget about it for a while and just rest."

I opened my eyes. She was looking at me, her face only four or five inches away, and there was something more than concern in her expression. Her full lips were parted, quivering slightly with each breath. I leaned over and kissed her.

It was like touching off an explosion. Her body was a torch against mine, her mouth eager and demanding against mine.

It should have been right, but it wasn't. There was the memory of another night between us. When I closed my eyes I could see blonde hair, and I was smelling the wrong perfume. I held her close, my hands running over the soft curves of her body, and told myself it would go away. But it didn't.

I pulled away from her and shook my head. "I'm sorry, Julie," I said. "I guess the beating took more out of me than I thought." I tried to make the lie sound good. "I hurt all over. Nothing makes it stop." I lit a cigarette and passed it over to her. Then I lit another for myself.

"Sorry, honey," I said again.

"Shhh," she said, putting her fingers gently over my lips. "I understand, Ciro. I shouldn't have let you." She laughed and looked at me, her blue eyes honest and untroubled. "Was I shameless?"

"Utterly," I said, grinning. I felt a little better about it. "There'll be another day, Julie. Now I think I'd better go home and sleep it off."

"Do you want to stay here?" She smiled demurely. "I promise to leave you alone."

"My blood pressure wouldn't stand it," I said. I stood up. "But I'll be back."

"All right, Ciro," she said.

I climbed into the Cadillac and headed for the hotel. I was filled with anger at myself, but there was no point in working it up. I tried to put the redhead and the blonde both out of my mind.

Something else was bothering me, nagging at my thoughts. I knew what it was but I didn't know what it meant. It was Frankie Carmel. He'd let Jay Crowley blackmail him into coming along and saving me. He'd said that he didn't want any publicity about being in Las Vegas. I could understand that, but the point was he got publicity all the time. He'd figured in newspaper and magazine articles. He'd even been on the cover of *Time*. Why was he suddenly so leary of being written up in a small-town newspaper that he let himself be put in the position of taking sides against some of his own men? I felt the answer was something simple, but I just couldn't find it. Maybe it was because I was so tired.

I left the Cadillac in the hotel garage and went up to my room. As I opened the door, I saw that there was a light in the room. I knew I hadn't left it on. Someone must be waiting for me. It might be the cops and it might not. I pulled the gun from my shoulder holster and went in fast, stepping up against the wall and covering the room.

"Hello, Buffalo Bill," she said. "Where's your horse?"

I lowered the gun, feeling silly. I felt even sillier because I suddenly realized that I hadn't loaded the gun after Weeper Wade took the shells out of it. I didn't often make mistakes like that. Once could be enough.

She sat on the edge of my bed, a glass of whisky in her hand. There was a bottle of Canadian Club on the floor, with maybe two inches gone from it. She must have seen the direction of my glance.

"Relax, Buster," she said. "Your bottle was almost empty so I bought one of my own. Have a drink on the house."

"Okay," I said. I got the other glass and poured myself a drink. Then I looked at her again. She was wearing a skirt and sweater that looked as if they'd been thrown on. Her black hair looked wind-blown; her face was still that of a tough little gamin. No slick grooming here, but she had an appeal all her own.

"Carla Blane, Girl Photographer," I said with a grin. "How did you get in here?"

"A romantic bellhop."

"Romantic?"

"Sure," she said. "He fell in love with the two bucks I slipped him."

"The next question," I said, "is: why?"

"Call it girlish curiosity," she said. She stared up at me, her eyes bright. "What happened to you, Buster? Show your pictures to the wrong person?"

"No," I said shortly. "It's just my newest hobby. Some people collect butterflies. I collect bruises. Now what's the real reason you're here?"

"I told you it was curiosity," she said. "I want to know what's going on. Those pictures last night, why somebody's been working over your hot little face—the works. I think you owe it to me."

"Why do I owe you anything?" I asked.

"We had a lot of excitement at the studio today," she said. "When Earl Sutton came in he was walking about six inches off the floor. He raised hell with the darkroom man and told him to tear up the negatives of those pictures I took of you last night and to forget they were ever made. Then he started in on me. After a number of pointed remarks about the morals of a girl who would take pictures of a nude man, he fired me. He also said if I ever admitted publicly to having taken the pictures, he'd see to it that I was run out of town."

"I'm sorry, Carla," I said. That seemed to be all I was saying lately.

"To hell with the job," she said. "It wasn't much of a one, anyway. But early this evening I got a call at the place where I live. The guy didn't bother telling me who he was, he just said he thought I ought to leave town right away—that the climate in Las Vegas was bad for me." She lit a cigarette and glanced up, her eyes hard and bright. "I took some pictures of you last night. Now I'm being pushed around. I don't like it. And I've got a right to know why."

She had a point, so I told her about it. Not all. I left out some details—in fact I left out the whole business with Valda Menotti—but I told her why I was there and why I'd come limping in covered with bruises. While I talked I kept working on the Canadian Club, and I began to feel a little better. I was getting just enough numbness to make some of the soreness go away.

She nodded when I'd finished. "I thought it was something like that," she said, "but I wanted to know where you stood. I don't mind being the clobbered innocent bystander, but I hate like hell to be a plain patsy."

I knew how she felt. It was the way I'd felt plenty of times myself. "So that's it," I said. "In the meantime, you'd better take that advice and beat it. I can send you to someone who'll give you a job. I owe you that much."

"I don't like running because of a bunch of punks," she said. She studied me for a minute. "You're a bum, Blake."

"Probably," I agreed. The Canadian Club had warmed me up and I was feeling no pain. "What of it?"

"I'm an expert on bums," she said. "I'm one myself. But don't read anything else into it. When I say bum I don't mean tramp."

"I'll take your word for it," I said agreeably.

She was staring into her glass of whisky as though she saw something there. "It's a funny thing about bums and tramps. I guess in some way they're alike. Up to a point. The tramps are all dead inside; you can't hurt them. But it doesn't work both ways. A bum will meet a tramp and think it's another bum. A big deal or maybe even a big romance. Then the next thing you know the bum is hurt. Bad and deep, way inside where you can't put a band-aid on it."

Suddenly I didn't feel so agreeable and I didn't know why. "You seem to know all about it," I said.

"I do," she said. "Maybe you don't know it, but there are male tramps just the same as there are female ones. I've been stepped on a few times so I know what it feels like. A tramp doesn't even have to do anything to hurt you—sometimes he does it just by being."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked.

"I'm sticking my neck out again," she said quietly. "I heard some talk down at the studio today. You were with Valda Menotti last night before she was killed, weren't you?"

I started to get angry, but I knew it was no use. Probably a lot more people would be talking about it soon, and I might as well get used to it. "Yeah," I said. "Before and during. Only I didn't know anything about the during because I was knocked out. By a mickey."

She nodded. "And today you're feeling like hell. You keep remembering things that happened and the way she looked and it hurts every time. Then you keep thinking about other things you've maybe heard since about her and it only hurts worse instead of making the other go away. Isn't that the way it is?"

"Maybe. What the hell makes you think you know so much?"

"I used to see her at the Silver Lode Club," she said. "She had a lot on the ball—only the ball came to a sharp point. I could see it. I could see the way she got inside men and touched feelings they didn't even know they had. She could do that, but she didn't have anything to give when they reached back. With a guy like you it would hurt even more. And it wouldn't have made any difference if she had lived. It would have been the same thing."

Maybe she was right, I didn't know. All I knew was that I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't even want to get angry. I just wanted to point all those words in another direction.

"Something like that happen to you?" I asked.

"It did." She said it flatly, her voice looking at it the way you look at an old scar. Then she picked up the bottle and poured drinks for both of us. She held up her glass. "Carla Blane, Girl Photographer, Faces Life." She tossed the whisky off neat, the way a man does.

We talked some more and drank some more and the day didn't seem so bad after all. It was partly the whisky and partly the girl with the gaminesque face. I began to be thankful for both.

After a while, for no other reason than that it seemed to be the right thing to do, I pulled her over to me and kissed her. She stiffened at first, but then her lips responded. I couldn't help being aware of the difference from the other two women I'd kissed in Las Vegas. Here was no wild flame springing up suddenly and threatening to engulf me. In some strange way it was better, as though all she had to give wasn't right up on the surface. Then it occurred to me that I might be drunk.

With the thought, the door to my room swung open with a crash that made me jerk loose from her. I looked around.

The cops were back.

CHAPTER 5

We must have been quite a little tableau: the cops with their looks of surprise slowly turning to nasty leers, and Carla and I sitting as if we'd just been lifted out of the deep freeze. I don't know how Carla felt, but the expressions on the cops' faces made me feel as if I'd just been caught with the jam smeared all over my face. Only it was lipstick instead of jam.

There were only two of them this time, the lieutenant and his pal. Maybe they'd decided the little guy was too honest to be brought along.

"There's an old family tradition in America," I said, "that people knock before barging into someone's room. You boys ought to look it up. You don't want to be un-American."

"Why should we knock?" the lieutenant asked. "We'd miss a lot of things that way." He cocked his head on one side and looked at me. "It's really too bad to bust in on a guy when he's just starting to make time. What do you think, Jim? You think he was just getting started?"

The other big cop licked his lips and his eyes were bright. Too bright. "Looks that way, Lieutenant," he said. "Maybe we should've waited another five minutes outside the door."

"Maybe," the lieutenant said. He was still looking at me. "You'll have to excuse Jim, Blake. He ain't married like me and it makes him a little wild when he sees someone else making so much time. You're real busy, Blake. A blonde last night, a brunette tonight. Real busy."

"You're both very cute," I said. "If you have any business with me, spit it out. If not, get to hell out of here before I take your badge away from you and do a little carving with it."

Carla laughed, some of the tension trickling out through her voice.

His face darkened. "You won't be such a smart bastard when I get through with you," he said. "I'm arresting you, Blake."

"Are you doing it just to amuse yourself or have you got a charge?"

"I don't have to charge you for twenty-four hours," he said with satisfaction. "In the meantime, I'm arresting you for questioning about the murder of Valda Menotti."

I was beginning to wish I hadn't told Jay Crowley I wouldn't bother him any more. "Can I make a phone call?" I asked.

He laughed as if I'd told him a funny joke. "The law says we got to let you get in touch with a lawyer when you're charged with a crime, but we ain't charged you with anything yet. Maybe you can make a phone call later."

"All right," I said. "If that's the way you're going to play it, let's go." I stood up.

"In a mighty big hurry, ain't you?" he asked. His gaze shifted over to Carla. "Maybe I ought to take her in, too."

"Why?" Carla asked. Her voice had tightened until it was like the crack of a whip. "Why, you big ape?"

"Well, you're here in this fellow's room," Baker said, "and anybody could see what was about to go on. Guess I could pull you in for soliciting."

I knew I had to step in fast before she answered him. It wasn't hard to guess that she had a temper like a three-alarm fire, and if she ever turned it on the lieutenant she wouldn't have a chance of staying out of jail. I didn't want her to be arrested. Partly on my own account—if she was free she might talk enough about what happened for it to get back to Jay—but mostly for her sake.

"You can't arrest her for being in my room," I said. "She works for me, so she's got a perfect right to be here."

"Works for you, huh? From the way she looked when we busted in here, I guess she likes her work."

"Look," I said. "You want to take me in, I'll go. But if you want to take both of us, you'll have to do it the hard way. I don't think you and your friend are men enough. Which way do you want it, Lieutenant?" My coat was off and my shoulder holster was in full view so he couldn't make any mistake about what I meant.

"If—" Carla began.

"Shut up," I said. "Well, Lieutenant?"

He forced his gaze up from my gun and when I saw the expression in his eyes I knew I'd win.

"Maybe you'd better give me that gun," he said heavily. "I told you I'm arresting you."

"I heard you," I said. "I'm willing to go peacefully, but you'll get the gun when we get to the station. If you want it before then, you'll have to come and get it. Want to try?"

"All right," he said sourly. "Get moving."

"Lieutenant," said the other cop, "maybe I ought to stay here and watch the dame, huh?"

The lieutenant gave an imitation of a bottle that had been filled too much before capping. Some of it fizzed over on his friend.

"Goddamn it, Jim," he shouted, "will you stop drooling over dames when we're working! We're taking a guy in to talk about murder. Now get a move on."

Jim looked startled. "Yeah, sure, Lieutenant."

"Good boy," I murmured. It won me a look from the lieutenant that was filled with promise. I was sure he'd keep it, too, but at least all three of us were moving toward the door. I managed to be the last one out. I winked at Carla as I closed the door.

I debated the whole thing in my mind as we went downstairs. The lieutenant was just gun-shy enough so that I could probably get away from him if I wanted to. But that would mean getting out of town without finishing the job I'd come to do. On the other hand, if I went with him I was due for some more lumps until someone got around to bailing me out. The trouble was that the beating Eddie had given me and the skinful of Canadian Club were making me think I could take anything the lieutenant dished out. I was feeling real brave as we walked out to the squad car.

"You and Jim ride in the front," I said. "I'll sit in the back, so I'll know that nobody tries to sneak back to the hotel."

Jim looked bewildered, but Lieutenant Baker's expression was murderous. I was enjoying myself while I could.

That was the way we rode down to the station. The lieutenant parked the squad car in the back of the station and turned around to face me.

"Now give me that goddamn gun," he said.

I thought of insisting on wearing it right into jail, but decided maybe that was carrying things too far. I pulled the gun out and handed it over. The lieutenant broke it open and looked at it.

"I'm a sonuvabitch," he said. "It's empty."

"You're always right, Lieutenant," I said cheerfully.

He got out and opened the rear door. I got out quickly before he could get the idea of helping me. We went inside. There were two other cops there. One of them was the desk sergeant and the other was the little cop who had been with my friends the day before. The desk sergeant picked up his pen as he saw us come in.

"Not now, Foley," the lieutenant said. "We're going to ask him a few questions before we book him. Want to come along, Sackley?"

The little cop shook his head. He knew what was going to happen and he didn't want any part of it. "I've got some work to do," he said.

The lieutenant laughed nastily and shoved me ahead of him. We walked down a long corridor and finally stopped in front of a door. The lieutenant reached around and threw the door open. I had a glimpse of four white walls and a single bright light. Then his fist crashed against the back of my neck and I went stumbling into the room with a rush.

When I finally turned around, rubbing the spot where he'd hit me, they were both in the room and the door was shut. I glanced around but there wasn't much to see. The light was fixed so that most of it poured down on me. By squinting I could see them and the two chairs that were there for them. There was also a small table near the door, but I couldn't make out what was on it. The rest was just the white-washed walls.

"Now, you bastard," the lieutenant said, "you're going to start a different tune than you've been singing."

"I can't carry a tune," I said. "By the way, weren't you supposed to check my gun with the desk sergeant?"

"We might need it," he said. "I might get the idea of shooting you when you try to escape and it'll look better if your gun is around."

"You think of everything," I said admiringly.

"You're damn right I do." He advanced a little into the light and I saw he was carrying a regulation police club. "I guess we don't have to worry about marking you up this time, Blake. Somebody has already put enough marks on you to cover the new ones."

"I noticed you weren't surprised," I said. "Did they tell you about it in advance or have you had a chance to see Eddie's nose?"

He ignored the question. "I'm going to take a few swings at you no matter what, but you can make it a little easier on yourself by telling us all about it. We know you killed Valda Menotti."

"If you know all about it why bother me?"

"Damn it, Lieutenant," the other cop said out of the darkness, "why do you waste so much time talking? Why don't you go to work on him?" He sounded pretty eager. I guessed if he couldn't get a girl, something like this was next best.

"Don't rush me, Jim," Baker said. He was smacking the police club against his palm. "You see how it is, Blake? We talked to a guy at the post office. He didn't remember the name, but he did remember that a package was mailed from the hotel last night, addressed to Washington. A package just about the right size to have a .38 in it. We've already sent word to the Washington cops to watch the mail deliveries to your office. I got a hunch that we'll get your gun, and that we'll find the bullet in Valda Menotti was fired from that gun."

"Why do you even have to examine it?" I asked. "The murderer told you that she was killed with my gun and he ought to know."

"Don't try to be smart, Blake. You want to tell us how you killed her?"

"I didn't kill her. She heard her husband was having you come out to the cabin so she committed suicide."

He sighed heavily. "He's going to be stubborn, Jim. I guess you'd better hand me the towel."

He turned and caught something the other cop threw to him. It was a towel, all right. Once it had probably been white, but now it was almost black. Some of the spots looked suspiciously like dried blood. He began to wrap it around the club.

"What did Eddie Trey use on you?" he asked. "A gun?"

"Yeah."

"I thought so," he said. "That's the trouble with guys like Eddie. He ain't had the advantage of police work. Now you take this business of using a towel around a club. The club works just as good but it don't hardly leave no marks. I remember one time I ruptured a guy's appendix with a club like this and there wasn't even a bruise on his belly. Remember that, Jim?"

"Yeah," Jim said enthusiastically.

They were a great little pair. Torquemada would have loved them.

The lieutenant finished wrapping the towel around the club and looked at me. I knew why he was being so slow. He liked to taste the anticipation.

"You want to talk yet, Blake?" he asked.

My mouth had gone all dry, and I was beginning to regret that I hadn't taken the runout I'd been thinking about back at the hotel. But I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of knowing how I felt. "The only thing I could say to you," I said, "would get me arrested for obscenity."

He grinned at me and swung the club. I tried to block the first blow with my arm. I didn't feel much when it landed, but my whole arm went numb. It fell to my side and I couldn't lift it again.

The next one caught me on the side of the head. Again there wasn't much pain at the point of contact, but a pinball of lights exploded inside my head, and then I felt as though someone had driven a hot needle through my brain.

He worked carefully, I'll say that much for him. If he'd concentrated too much on my head, he would soon have knocked me out, but he varied it. He slashed me across the face, rapped me over the kneecaps, jabbed the end of the club in my belly, and clubbed me across the kidneys. Three times he tried for my groin, but I was quick enough to avoid the blows.

The only sounds in the room were the deadly whacking of the club, the labored breathing of the lieutenant, and the panting of the other detective off in the darkness. I suppose it wouldn't have made any difference if I'd made all the noise I wanted to, but that too was part of my determination to give him nothing. I kept my teeth locked together and took it.

When he finally stopped, it was because he was getting tired. I could hear him gulping in air, but I had trouble seeing him. My eyes wouldn't quite focus and the light seemed to be spinning. All my hurts, the old and the new, had melted together into one big unlocalized ache.

"You ready to talk, Blake?" Lieutenant Blake asked. His voice seemed to come from a great distance.

"Go to hell," I said. My voice was thick and for a moment I thought somebody else had said it.

"You might as well," he said. "You won't get out of here until you do talk. We know all about it. All you have to do is tell it for the record."

"If you know all about it, why don't you confess to it?" I said. It was an effort to talk, but at least he was keeping the club away while he was questioning me.

"We know about it," he repeated. "You thought you had picked yourself up a beautiful blonde and were all set for a big night. You went out to her husband's cabin with her. You were in such a hurry to get in the hay with her that you didn't even bother to learn her name. Then maybe afterwards you found out who she was. You were in trouble. Here you were romping in the sheets with the wife of the guy you were going to try to pin something on. You knew it wouldn't look good. It might even be the end of those soft jobs with Congressional committees. You could see only one way out. You killed her."

"You're wasting your time," I told him. "You ought to be writing for television. Clean it up a little and it would be just about right."

"He's going to be a tough one to crack," the lieutenant said with satisfaction. "You want to take over for a while, Jim?"

"Yeah, sure," Jim said. He came shuffling into the light, swinging a blackjack on a long thong. He hadn't been doing anything but watching, but he'd already worked up a sweat.

"What a lovely perfume you use," I murmured. "What is it, Old Horse Saddle?"

He grinned at me, licking his lips. Then the blackjack snaked out and exploded against my jaw.

After that it was merely more of the same. When you get a beating like that there comes a point where everything flows together. One blow is like another and hurts neither more nor less. The pain becomes constant and isn't identifiable. Time stands still; there is no past or future, only the aching present. It is then that you draw up into a little knot within yourself and concentrate everything you've got on just enduring.

They took turns. When one was too tired to continue, the other took over. When it was the lieutenant's turn, he talked between blows, his voice floating to me out of space. I was aware that there were things he wanted me to say, that somehow all this might stop if I would only say them, but none of it bore any relation to reality. It was all part of an endless dream, and I was both the sleeper and the watcher.

Once they both left me for a time. I had no idea how long they were gone. When I finally realized that I was alone, I slumped down to the floor right where I stood. It seemed that I slept in little snatches but it was difficult to tell when I was asleep and when I was awake.

Then they were back, pushing me to my feet, their big meaty hands hurting worse than the club and blackjack. It was a strange sensation. I couldn't see them clearly; the outlines of their figures leaped and swayed. Slippery, I thought, trying to focus on them; just like their character. But I could feel them and smell them. I wondered if it were like being blind. Only blindness couldn't hurt so much.

The blows started again and went on and on.

Suddenly they stopped again, and after a bit I knew it was because someone else had come into the room. I could hear the drone of voices and then I heard the lieutenant swearing. He ended with something about water. I wondered if that was some sort of new swear word.

They were slapping me in the face with something that was cold and stung. My mind worked laboriously on the problem and finally concluded it was a wet towel. It hurt almost as much as the club, but pretty soon things cleared a little. Not much, but a little.

The light seemed dimmer and I thought it was just that I couldn't see it. There was a strange gray patch over to one side. I squinted at it until I saw what it was. A window. It must be getting light outside, or maybe it was already daylight. I felt proud of my deduction. A regular Sherlock Holmes.

"Come on, Blake," Lieutenant Baker said roughly. "You're a lucky bastard."

I wondered how he figured that, but it didn't seem too important. I let myself be steered out of the room, pushing one foot ahead of the other. My feet seemed detached, as though they didn't belong to me at all.

Then we were in the front of the station, and there were other people there. Two of them. I concentrated on one at a time. One of them, I decided, was the desk sergeant. I couldn't tell if he were the same one I'd seen before. The other man was big and there was something familiar about him. When his face stopped shimmering for a moment, I recognized him. Big Joe Hennessey. I knew there was something important about his being there, but I couldn't put my finger on it at the moment. His voice sounded angry and I tried to listen.

"—beating him all night, Baker," he was saying. "This is one time you're not going to get away with it. I'm going to see to it personally."

"Somebody beat him up before we even arrested him," the lieutenant said sullenly. "All we did was question him."

"I know your methods of questioning," Hennessey said. "I'm going to put a stop to them." He let his breath out in an explosive sigh. "Come on, Blake. You're free on a writ of habeas corpus."

Blake. That was me. Habeas corpus. Produce the body. The body was me, too. I giggled at the thought.

"Come on," Big Joe said. He took my arm and it was surprising that such a big man could be so gentle. Even so, it hurt.

Things cleared a little more and the room stopped spinning. "Just a minute," I said thickly. It wasn't my voice, but it would have to do until I got my own back. I turned around and looked until my eyes found the lieutenant. "My gun," I said.

He pulled it from his pocket and held it out. I took it with a hand that was no longer part of me, yet still obeyed my commands. I looked at the gun, remembering there were no shells in it.

"It won't always be unloaded," I said. It was like a promise to myself.

I turned and left the station with Big Joe Hennessey. Outside the sun was coming up and there were a few people on the streets. I could see a little better, but there still wasn't anything worth seeing. All that was important at the moment was my own beaten body, the parts held together only by a thin thread of pain.

"Removable parts," I said and giggled. I didn't like the sound of it and tried to pull myself together. "Cigarette?" I asked.

Big Joe put a cigarette between my lips and lit it. I drew in the smoke and it seemed to help. I was hurting more but now there was a reality to the pain.

"My car's right here," Big Joe was saying. "I think I'd better get you to the hospital."

"No hospital," I said. "To the hotel. You can have a doctor look me over, but I think I'll live."

He helped me down to the car and opened the door. I got in, but even the soft cushions seemed to be made of spikes. Big Joe went around and got in behind the wheel. He started the motor and I could feel the vibrations through my whole body.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get here," Big Joe said. "I took some sleeping pills last night and my man wouldn't try waking me before morning."

"How did you find me?" I asked.

"A young lady. Carla Blane. She said that you had told her I would get you out if the police pulled you in. She kept calling all night and she was an angry young lady when she finally got me this morning. I don't blame her."

Good old Carla, I thought.

"She tried two or three other lawyers," he said, "but they wouldn't touch it when they heard your name."

"A rose by any other name is a rose is a rose," I said. I wasn't sure whether I was being witty or delirious. It didn't seem to make much difference.

"I still think a hospital might be the best bet," Big Joe said. It was obvious what he thought about my dissertation on roses. "You were beaten up last night by Eddie Trey and Weeper Wade and then Baker must have worked on you six or seven hours. Why take chances?"

"The hotel," I said stubbornly. "How'd you know about Eddie Trey?"

"The young lady told me."

Good old Carla, I thought again. She'd been in there, pushing back. . . . I giggled to myself.

"What is it?" he asked. He sounded worried. Maybe, I thought, I *was* flipping my lid. If I had a lid to flip. That didn't seem important either.

"I was thinking," I said. "A big deal. The hot shot Washington detective. Me. The guy who just keeps pushing until somebody cracks. Only this time everybody's been pushing me. Valda Menotti. Eddie Trey. Lieutenant Baker. Maybe I ought to give up the cup. The pusher's cup."

"We're almost there," he said. He sounded like he was humoring me and I almost giggled again. But I can't stand men who giggle.

Then we were at the hotel and he was helping me into the elevator. I heard him telling the bellboy to get a doctor. The next thing I knew we were in my room. It looked pretty much like it had the night before. The cover on the bed was still mussed up where Carla and I had been sitting on it. There were still two glasses and a bottle of whisky beside the bed.

"Get your clothes off," Big Joe ordered. "The doctor will be here in a minute."

I didn't remember taking them off but pretty soon I was stretched out on the bed without them. Big Joe Hennessey was standing there looking at me, clucking to himself like an old mother hen. And then after a bit there was another man there, bending over and prodding me with his finger or an instrument. Once for a minute I thought he was jabbing me with a police club and I started to get up, but he pushed me down gently and I realized he was a doctor. Then I heard him talking to someone.

"I don't think there are any internal injuries," he was saying, "although I can't be sure without taking X-rays. He really should be removed to a hospital."

"No hospital," I said. I wasn't just being stubborn about it. I knew that if they put me in a hospital it would be several days before I could get out. I didn't know why, but I had a feeling of urgency about this case. Maybe I just wanted to get even while I still had the bruises to remind me how much I owed a few people.

"Well . . ." the doctor said unhappily. He still wasn't talking to me. "This man has been badly beaten. I—ah—it should be reported to the police."

"The police did it," Big Joe said.

"Oh," the doctor said. "Well, I don't know . . ."

"Do you know who I am?" Big Joe thundered. "I'm Big Joe Hennessey. You do what you can to fix him up and stop mumbling at me."

I laughed quietly to myself. I knew how that doctor was feeling. He was caught in the middle between the cops and an important politician. He must have been wishing he'd become a horse doctor.

Then he was bending over me again and he seemed to be doing things to me with his hands. Sometimes it stung a little and sometimes it was soothing.

"There," he said finally, "that's all I can do now." He continued to bend over me. "I think you'll be all right. But it's imperative that you spend at least three days in bed. Otherwise I will not be responsible . . ."

"Sure," I said.

"Watch for any special eye trouble or dizziness and call me if there is any. There might be some injury to the brain."

"How will I know, Doc?" I asked. "I've been dizzy all my life."

He made a noise in his throat and faded out of sight.

"I'll look in on him again some time tomorrow," I heard him saying. "I think he'll be all right if he stays in bed."

"All right," Big Joe said. "Send your bill to me, Doctor."

"I think—" the doctor began.

"Goodbye, Doctor," Big Joe said firmly.

A moment later I heard the door close. Then Big Joe came over and stood beside the bed. My eyes were closed, but I could sense him standing there.

"Blake," he said, "I've known young fellows like you before. You're tough, but you think you're tougher than you are. Right now you're probably thinking about getting up and going gunning for Ricci Menotti and his friends. Don't do it. I don't want to have to make a trip down to the morgue to identify a client."

I gave him a grin even though it hurt like hell to move my face. "I'll give you the low-down, Big Joe," I said. "Right this minute, if Ricci Menotti were to walk in the door over there, I'd have to get somebody else to pull the trigger. I'm going after him, but not until I can hold a gun."

"All right," he said gruffly. "Anything you want, boy?"

"Sleep."

"Good. I'm leaving now, but I'll check with the hotel every hour to be sure they haven't picked you up again. I don't think they will right away, but we won't take any chances."

"Tell them downstairs," I said, "to pretend the room isn't rented. No phone calls, no visitors, no service—nothing until I ask for it."

"All right. Take care of yourself, boy."

The door slammed and I was alone. Without opening my eyes, I reached down beside the bed and fumbled around until I found the bottle. When I couldn't hold it up any longer, I let it go and drifted off into sleep.

CHAPTER 6

Even in my sleep I hurt. And it was a long night. It was all like a nightmare whether I was awake or asleep. I couldn't remember much about it. I woke up a few times, long enough to reach for the bottle beside the bed and take another drink. Once I dreamed Carla was there, but when I awakened it was only the pillow. Another time I dreamed it was the redhead. That time it was the bunched-up bed clothes.

Finally I came all the way out of sleep. I lay there, staring at the ceiling, sorting out what was real. I still hurt all over, but now there was a difference. It wasn't so sharp. It was more of a soreness, as though all of my muscles were protesting at their existence. I experimented with moving. It was a little like the morning after the first day of football practice, multiplied a few times, but I could move. That was the important thing.

Changing my position made me aware of my head. It ached. Not in one spot, but all over. The headache rattled like the grandfather of all hangovers.

I reached down beside the bed and found the bottle. It was empty.

Then I made my big effort. I reached for the telephone. It was like walking across Death Valley, but I made it.

"What time is it?" I asked the operator.

"Nine o'clock in the morning, sir," she said. She was just too damn cheerful about the whole thing.

"What day?"

She giggled and told me the date. I'd been asleep for a little more than twenty-four hours.

"There are some messages for you, Mr. Blake," she said. "A—"

"Hold them for a while," I said, "and give me room service."

When room service answered I told them to send up a bottle of aspirin and a bottle of Canadian Club. I told them my door might be locked and to give the boy a passkey. Then I dropped the receiver back on the hook. I gritted my teeth against the headache and held on.

The door opened and the boy came in with the two bottles.

"Put them down by the bed," I told him.

He came over and set them down. He looked at me curiously. "A bad night, sir?" he asked.

"A bad night," I agreed. "Look. In about twenty minutes, bring me some breakfast. Ham and eggs—a big slice of ham and three eggs. And a big pot of coffee. Make it twice the amount you'd usually serve."

"Yes, sir."

I glanced over at the dresser. The silver dollars I'd won that first day were still piled on it. "Go over to the dresser," I said, "and help yourself. And don't forget the breakfast."

"Yes, sir," he said. He went over and rattled the silver dollars. Then he was gone.

I wrestled with the leadfoil around the top of the bottle and finally got it off. I took four tablets out of the aspirin bottle and washed them down with a big gulp of whisky. I put my head back on the pillow and just waited.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew the boy was wheeling in a tray. I stared at him a minute before I remembered I'd ordered breakfast. But my headache was a little better and I was aware of being hungry.

"Anything else, sir?" he asked.

"Nothing. Help yourself." I indicated the dresser. I watched him dig into the silver dollars and leave. Then I experimented with sitting up.

It went off better than I expected. My muscles protested and my head pounded a little, but I made it. And the food tasted good. I was beginning to be interested in being alive.

A half hour later I was finishing off the last of the coffee and feeling a lot better. I still hurt and every move required a special effort, but there was an improvement. I lit a cigarette and it tasted good.

The urgency I had felt when the doctor was trying to get me into a hospital suddenly returned. Only this time I knew why. I'd been in Las Vegas for three days. It was now two days since I'd mailed my other gun—the one that had been used to kill Valda—to myself in Washington. I was sure that Lieutenant Baker hadn't been lying when he said that they'd ask the Washington police to watch for it. It would probably be delivered in two days. And that was how much time I had. Once they got their hands on that gun and could prove the death bullet had been fired from it, they'd stop playing around. I'd be charged with the murder of Valda Menotti.

I had no illusions about it. I hadn't killed her, but I didn't have a chance of proving it. Once they arrested me, George Holland would take over and there'd be a quick trial. I had a hunch that Big Joe Hennessey's best wouldn't be enough. I had to clean everything up in two days or expect the worst.

Something else came back to nag me—the thing that had been bothering me after I left Julie Lawrence's apartment. It was Frankie Carmel running away from publicity so fast he'd let himself be blackmailed into doing something he hadn't wanted to do. Now I suddenly thought I had the answer to that, too.

Frankie didn't want his presence in Las Vegas advertised. Why? There were a lot of people who might be interested in knowing that Frankie suddenly went anywhere. Treasury men, for instance. Frankie's appearance wasn't entirely related to unloading Ricci Menotti. He could have entrusted that to somebody else, or if that were all that was involved, he wouldn't have cared about anyone knowing he was there. There must be a big shipment of narcotics around that hadn't been moved out yet. That would explain Frankie's actions.

Just the act of thinking made me feel better, too. I was back in business. I picked up the phone.

"I'll take those messages now, honey," I told the operator.

"Yes, Mr. Blake. Mr. Hennessey left word for you to call when you felt like it. Mr. Crowley, of the *Plain Dealer,* has called seven or eight times. A young lady has called three times, but didn't leave any name. That's all."

"Thanks, honey," I said and hung up.

I tried standing up and walking. That hurt more, but after the first few steps it was better. I went into the bathroom and got up enough nerve to look at myself in the mirror. It wasn't an encouraging sight, but it wasn't any worse than I had expected. My face was swollen but it was that way all over so it didn't look too lopsided. I had two black eyes; I'd probably have had more if I hadn't run out of eyes. There was enough adhesive on me to make me a walking advertisement. The worst bruises looked even more so because the doctor had dabbed some kind of purple medicine all over me.

I needed a shave, but after I had prodded at my face with one finger I decided that would have to wait. It was too tender to stand a razor just yet.

I turned on the shower and stepped in. I kept it running as hot as I could stand it and stayed there until I began to feel weak from the heat. Then I climbed out and dried myself by patting with the towel as gently as I could. There wasn't a spot where it didn't hurt to touch, but the hot water had taken away some of the stiffness. Walking was easier now. I went back inside, picked up the phone and I gave the operator Hennessey's number.

A servant answered but as soon as I told him who it was Big Joe was on the phone.

"How are you feeling, boy?" he asked.

"Pretty good," I said. "I wouldn't want to bump into anything, but I'm in motion."

"Going to stay in bed?"

"Hell, no," I said. "I won't find our friend there."

"You probably should rest up," he said, "but I guess it's just as well that you won't. I've been talking to one of my friends up in Reno. The state committee's getting nervous."

"Why?"

"They got a call from somebody who told them you were mixed up in the murder down here. A couple of members of the committee are up for re-election this fall and they're starting to breathe fast."

"Meaning if anything comes out in the open they'll drop me?"

"I'm afraid so, son."

I was about to give my opinion of politicians but then I remembered he was one and he'd done me a favor. "Oh, well, I just got through figuring that I had about two days, so I guess they can't cut it much shorter than that."

"Got any plans?"

"Nothing except that I'm going to start pushing back. I'll see you around."

"I hope so, son," he said.

On that cheerful note, we hung up.

Next I put in a call to Jay Crowley.

"I'll be over to see you," I said as soon as he answered. Then I hung up before he could ask any questions.

I lit a cigarette and thought about getting dressed. Somebody knocked on the door. I was about to tell them to come in when I thought of something.

"Just a minute," I yelled. I got my gun and went over to the dresser and loaded it. While I was at it, I slipped a box of shells into the pocket of my coat on the back of a chair. Then I went back and sat on the bed.

"Come in," I yelled.

The door opened and Carla came in. She glanced at me and grinned. "Every time I've seen you," she said, "you've either been naked or pointing a gun at me. This time it's both. Does that mean you're becoming fond of me?"

I tossed the gun on the bed. "Sorry," I said. "I was just going to get dressed."

"Don't bother on my account," she said. "You haven't got anything I haven't already seen." Her glanced raked over my body. "Except for the bruises," she said more soberly. "Did they do all that?"

"Most of it. Eddie only worked on my face. The rest of it is all due to Las Vegas' finest."

"The bastards," she said bitterly. "You know, I was ready to kill somebody. I couldn't get that goddamn politician out of bed. I tried a couple of other lawyers but they chickened out."

"You did all right, honey," I said. "If it hadn't been for you, it might have been a lot worse."

"I called several times," she said. "When I couldn't get through to you, I finally called that politician again last night. He said you were sleeping it off. Are you all right?"

"More or less," I said. I looked at her and decided she was even cuter than I had thought at first. "Sorry I can't pick up where we were so rudely interrupted, but I bruise easily today."

She gave me that impish grin. "First time I ever saw a man who didn't feel like making a pass," she said. "Maybe that's the solution: arrange to have them beaten up every few days. What cooks now?"

"I'm going out and stir things up," I said. "I've got a few accounts to settle while I'm at it." I got up and started to get dressed.

"What can I do to help?" she asked.

"Get out of town so you don't get in the way of something that's meant for me. Go to Washington. I'll give you a letter to someone. If you don't have enough money, I can let you have it."

She was shaking her head. "Don't try to give me the brush," she said. "I told you I'm not running. Maybe I can't fight back but I want to see the finish. You might need someone to yell for a lawyer again."

I looked at her and saw it was no use arguing. "Okay, honey," I said. "But be careful."

The phone rang. I scooped it up and answered.

"Ciro," a voice said breathlessly, "this is Julie."

"Yeah?" I said.

"I've got to see you."

"Okay. Where and when?"

"I wish it were now, but I've got to get back to the office. I came down to phone from the drugstore. Make it tonight at my apartment. I—I think I've got news."

"Good. I'll be there."

I hung up and saw that Carla was staring at me with a wise expression on her face.

"A dame?" she asked.

"A dame," I admitted. "But strictly business. I think." The last was added as I remembered the negligee.

"Sure," she said. "Business. Is she a bum or a tramp?"

I thought about it. "I'm not sure. I'll let you know."

"Just remember," she said, "that you bruise easily today."

"Baby," I said, grinning, "I couldn't forget that if I wanted to."

I finished dressing, picked up my gun and put it in the holster.

"Come on," I said. "Can I drop you somewhere?"

"You can't drop me," she said, glancing at me from the side of her eyes. "I'm just going to float around until you're ready to catch me."

We went downstairs and I left her in the lobby. I got the Cadillac out of the garage and drove over to the *Plain Dealer* building. Jay Crowley was in his office, looking as nervous as a cat up a tree.

"What the hell's been happening?" he asked before I could get through the door. "I finally called Hennessey and he told me you'd been picked up by the cops and he'd gotten you out." He took another look at my face. "Hell, man, what happened to you?"

"Lieutenant Baker," I said. "The lieutenant has quite a way with a police club wrapped in a towel. And he has an overgrown juvenile delinquent named Jim Drake who does all right with a sap."

"My God," he said. "They can't get away with that. I'll plaster it all over the front pages."

I shook my head. "No, Jay. I'll handle it my way."

He ran one hand through his hair. "Every goddamn thing that happens is off the record," he complained. "What's the rest of the story I can't print?"

I told him the whole thing right up through my talk with Hennessey about the state committee.

"He's right about their dropping you if anything breaks," he said. "I know all the members of that committee. In fact, I've suspected right along that they were pretty reluctant about hiring you to come down here."

"Then why hire me at all?"

"I think they were browbeaten into it."

"By whom?"

"Big Joe Hennessey. He may be retired, but he still throws a lot of weight in this state, and I have a hunch that he's the one who made them do something. Otherwise that anonymous letter might have been lost in the files. By the way, did you see the writer?"

"I saw her, but her proof had already been stolen back. Get back to the other business. What makes you so sure Hennessey was responsible for hiring me?"

"It's mostly a hunch," he said, "but I'll bet I'm right. When Big Joe was still active in politics, he was a man who never forgot a grudge. It was pretty well known that he'd move heaven and hell to get somebody he didn't like. I don't suppose that retirement has changed him much."

"I don't get it," I said.

"About six months ago," he said, "Big Joe was in the Silver Lode with some friends. Big Joe had some kind of run-in with Ricci Menotti. He's probably the only decent man in town who would dare to stand up to Menotti."

"What was the row about?"

"I don't know. Apparently nobody knows what started it, but plenty of people heard Big Joe tell Menotti he was going to run him out of town. Menotti laughed and Big Joe stormed out of the place."

"So he had to get personally insulted before he thought about using his power to run a gangster out," I said. "That's what I like about politics. It's so clean and ethical. But I suppose I shouldn't look a gift lawyer in his habeas corpus."

"I suppose he should have done something about it before," Jay said, "but it's still better late than never. Anyway, I'm sure that he put the pressure on the state committee. He'll probably keep it on as long as he can, but I expect it still doesn't give you much time."

"Nobody has to tell me I don't have much time," I said bitterly. "I can figure that out for myself, as lame-brained as I am." I stood up. "Keep the obituary column open. I'm on my way."

"To do what?"

"I don't know for sure," I said honestly. "I'm pretty certain that somewhere in Las Vegas the Syndicate has a big shipment of dope. I'm going to try to flush it out."

"Look, Ciro," he said, "I have an idea. Why not let me call the state police or the police chief here? They aren't in Menotti's pocket. Why not let me call them and tell them everything we have?"

"Not a chance," I said. "One of the things we have is that I'm a candidate for the gas chamber. That's going to be enough to make them listen to the rest with only one ear. Besides, they'd only hamper my style. It has to be my way. See you around."

"Call me later."

"I will," I promised.

Downstairs, I got in the car and sat, thinking. I didn't have any plan. That was the trouble. I wasn't even sure where to start pushing. The only thing I could think of was to make them move a little faster than they intended.

I parked over on Fremont and walked down the street. The slot-machine players were out in full force. I reached the Silver Lode Club just after noon. A little early for the boys, but they might be in by now. I went inside.

I weaved through the old ladies who were losing the Sunday school money on the one-armed bandits and looked in the bar. I was in luck. I caught a glimpse of Eddie Trey and Harry Manners at the far end of the bar. My day was considerably brightened by the fact that Eddie's nose was all puffed up.

Pulling my gun from the holster, I used a handkerchief to cover it up. Then I went into the bar. I had almost reached them before they caught sight of me. Harry Manners was a guy with a one-track mind. His fists curled and he started to get off the stool.

"Hold it, boys," I said softly. I let them see the gun, but nobody else saw it. I had it too low for the barman to see and no one else looked around. "Hello, Eddie," I said.

"Getting brave, Shamus?" he asked. There was a sneer in his voice but he was keeping a respectful eye on my hand.

"Sure," I said. I studied them a minute. Harry Manners was a dumb one and that gave me an idea. "Is it all right to talk in front of him?" I asked, jerking my head in Harry's direction.

Eddie looked baffled. "Sure, go ahead and talk," he said.

"I came over because you didn't show up this morning like you were supposed to," I said.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he said.

"You know what I'm talking about," I said. "Did you find out where it's stashed?"

His face twisted with fury. "Look, you sonuvabitch—"

"Hell," I said, "you said it was okay to talk in front of him." I turned and walked swiftly away, but not before I'd seen that Harry was getting a funny look in his eye.

When I reached the slot machines I stopped and looked back. Eddie was talking to Harry and he looked as if he'd lost his temper. I grinned and slipped my gun back in the holster. None of the old ladies saw me. They were too busy looking at cherries and plums and lemons.

I turned and went through the main gambling room. There were a few people clustered around the dice table, but that was all. They paid no attention to me as I went across to the office door.

I turned the knob and threw the door open. Ricci Menotti was standing in front of the wall safe. He turned quickly, his face tightening as he recognized me.

"What the hell do you want?" he demanded.

"You," I said.

He laughed, but there was no humor in it. "You're pretty lucky, ain't you, Blake?"

"Maybe. How do you figure it?"

"Big Joe Hennessey got you away from Baker yesterday morning. That's a laugh. If you'd been there a couple more hours you would've broken."

"That what Baker says?"

He nodded. "But it don't make no difference. Baker tells me he expects to hear from Washington tomorrow some time. When he gets your gun you'll be back in and nobody'll get you out."

"I think it'll all be over before then," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think I've found a weak spot in your set-up, Ricci. I know about the stuff you're getting ready to move and I think maybe I'll have my hands on it before you get it moved. Once I get you with a good federal rap on you, I think you'll blow your top and maybe even tell us how you killed your wife with my gun."

Once more I thought maybe I'd pushed him too far. His eyes had narrowed until they were two slits in his heavy face. He was breathing fast and his right hand was trembling. I watched him and waited. The way I felt, I didn't give a damn whether he went for his gun or not.

Finally he jammed his hand in his pocket and I knew he had gotten control of himself. "Get out of here," he said hoarsely.

"Sure, Ricci," I said. "I'll see you at the wind-up."

I turned and walked back through the gambling room. There was a spot in the middle of my back that itched, but I figured it was just nerves. There were too many witnesses for him to shoot me in the back. Besides, he still wanted me as a clay pigeon.

When I reached the jack pot arcade, I stopped to see if anything was going to happen. It was. Harry Manners came out of the bar and headed for the office. Purpose was written all over his big, stupid face. I grinned to myself and turned to leave.

Somebody yelled my name, and I looked around. Eddie Trey was threading his way through the women toward me. Judging by the expression on his face, he was about ready to flip.

"You think you're a smart sonuvabitch," he said as he came up. "I'm—"

I didn't wait to hear what he was going to do. When he was close enough, I lifted one foot and smashed it down on the arch of his foot. His face twisted in pain and he started to pull away. I jabbed my knee up into his groin. As he doubled over, I lifted an uppercut to his nose. He went down, screaming thinly. Several women shrieked and then they started to mill around to find out why they had shrieked. While everybody was busy, I walked out to the car.

Four or five blocks away, I parked and went into a bar. I had one fast drink and lingered over the second, thinking about the situation. Deciding to add one more spoon to the pot, I went into a phone booth and called the hotel where Frankie Carmel was staying.

When I got through to Frankie, he didn't exactly sound as though he'd been waiting for me to call.

"What do you want, Blake?" he asked. "I told you that you wouldn't get any more out of me. If the thing's too big for you, get off when it slows for the curves. But don't come crying to me."

"Hold it, Frankie," I said. "You did me a favor night before last. I'm returning it. Then we're quits."

"What kind of favor?" he asked carefully.

"I think I've found our friend's weak spot," I said. "I'm going to crack down on him. Quick. I've got a hunch that he's in the middle of a big operation for you. I'd hate to see you lose all that money. I don't need it all. So I'm giving you a chance to see that it's moved before I crack down on him."

He didn't waste any time being coy. That's how he was different from the small fry in the Syndicate and maybe that's why he was where he was. "How much time?" he asked.

"Twenty-four hours at the outside," I said.

"Thanks, Blake," he said. "I won't forget it."

Sure, he wouldn't forget it. He'd probably arrange to have something appropriate put on my tombstone after he had me knocked off.

I went out and looked for a place to eat. I was feeling pretty pleased with myself. I had stirred up something that ought to boil over after it had cooked for a while. Oh, I knew that Ricci wouldn't believe that Eddie Trey was double-crossing him, but it would make him nervous just the same. And it would make Eddie nervous as well as angry. But Harry Manners believed that Eddie had made some deal with me and it would take him a couple of days to shift his mental gears even after Ricci reassured him. Until then he'd be watching Eddie, and that would make everybody a little more nervous.

In the meantime, Ricci couldn't be too sure that I didn't have something so he'd be under pressure from inside to move a little more quickly. And Frankie Carmel would probably start putting the pressure on him from the outside. All I had to do was wait a little while and watch them. I had it all figured out. They probably wouldn't make a move until very late that night or some time in the early morning hours. When they did, I was going to be there.

I had lunch and a couple more drinks. I was feeling a lot better, partly from the excitement, I suspected, but I still ached all over and I was getting tired. The whole afternoon was ahead of me and then it was going to be a long night. What I needed was more rest, but I didn't want to go back to the hotel. Then I had a bright idea. I was supposed to meet the redhead at her apartment as soon as she left work and I still had her key.

I drove over. There was a parking place in the back of the apartment house and I put the Cadillac there. Too many people were getting so they could recognize it. Then I went upstairs and let myself into her apartment. I took off my coat and shoes and stretched out on her bed. I went to sleep almost immediately.

When I awakened it was still light outside, but I could see that it was almost evening. The sun was low enough to send red streaks in through the window.

Something had awakened me and I lay there trying to figure out what it had been. Then suddenly I knew. The shower in the bathroom was on full force. I glanced around the room and saw the clothes tossed over a chair. The redhead was home.

After a while the shower stopped. I could hear little sounds as she moved around in the bathroom. I stayed where I was, just letting my thoughts drift. Then I realized that I had definitely recovered from the beatings, for I was waiting eagerly for the bathroom door to open.

Eventually it did, and she came into the bedroom. She had a large bath towel wrapped around her. It was just wide enough to cover the essential points and just narrow enough to keep me interested. She glanced over and saw that I was awake.

"Hello," she said. "Nice nap?"

"Yeah," I said, "but not as nice as the waking up. My dreams are never in technicolor." I was wondering what kept the towel in place. Magnetic attraction, maybe.

She laughed with pleasure and came over to sit on the edge of the bed. She looked at my face and there was concern in her blue eyes.

"Then it's true?" she asked quietly.

"What's true?"

"In the office," she said, "I heard Mr. Holland talking to someone about your being questioned by the police. They beat you, too, didn't they?"

"They were a little rough," I admitted.

"Poor darling," she said, leaning down to kiss me.

It started out as a sisterly kiss, but it got out of hand. Her lips brushed gently across my cheek like the wings of a butterfly. I heard her breath catch in her throat, then her mouth was melting into mine. Her body darted down to meet mine as my arms went around her.

The towel came away easily.

Later, when the room had stopped spinning, I lay looking at the same old spot on the ceiling. I was once more conscious of the aches in my body but it was a lazy awareness and I didn't seem to mind. I reached down to the floor and found a cigarette in my shirt pocket. I lit it.

"Me," she said.

She was lying on her back, her hair like a stream of copper over the pillow, with her eyes closed. I put the cigarette in her mouth and got another one for myself. I propped myself up on one elbow and looked at her. Her body was long and slender and beautiful. My gaze wandered affectionately over it and came finally to her face. Her eyes were open now.

"You like?" she asked.

"I like," I said gravely.

She stretched like a cat. "A working girl should always come home to something like this," she said.

"You mean there are other things like this?"

She laughed at me and swung her feet to the floor. She took a robe from the closet and put it on. It was blue and slinky and looked wonderful on her.

"How about a drink?" she asked.

"Love a drink."

She blew smoke at me and vanished in the direction of the kitchen.

I grinned to myself. It was probably a fatuous grin. I felt fatuous. My gaze wandered around the room and stopped at my shoulder holster looped over the back of a chair. It started me thinking again. And that was enough to bring me out of bed. I dressed in record time and was in the kitchen just as she was picking up the two glasses to bring them in.

"I was just about to demonstrate our superior room service," she said with a pout.

"I've already seen the best part of it," I said.

She made a face and lifted her glass. "To us," she said.

That brought back a memory of the same toast shared with someone else. It still hurt, but it seemed like a long time ago. I lifted my glass and drank.

"I hate to be a kill-joy," I said slowly, "but there's something we forgot."

"What?"

"You had something to tell me. That's what you said when you called this morning."

She looked like a little girl who has just been told she can't go to a party. "Must we?" she asked wistfully. "It could wait."

"We must," I said. "Time and tide wait for no man. Neither does Ricci Menotti."

She sat down at the kitchen table and rolled the glass between her hands. "We were building such a nice world away from all that," she said, "but I know you're right. It's just that sometimes it's hard for a girl to come back down to earth. . . . Mr. Holland had a call from Ricci Menotti this morning."

"What happened?"

"I took a chance and left my key open," she said. "I took it down in shorthand. Just a minute."

She stood up and left. When she came back she had a folded sheet of paper in her hand.

"Mr. Menotti said he wanted Mr. Holland to arrange a raid for the usual time tomorrow night," she said. She frowned at her notes. "Mr. Holland said he didn't think it was a good time. He said he thought they ought to wait until you were out of the way."

"Did he say how I was to be gotten out of the way?"

She shook her head. "Mr. Menotti said that was impossible. He said—and these are his exact words—'The stuff may be cool, but Blake's liable to start making the cabin hot any minute. He's on the warpath since Baker slipped up. He's liable to start nosing around out there and we can't take the chance. It's all set. Our man is coming in tomorrow night.' That was all."

"I'm a first class idiot," I said. I hit the table with my fist. "I should have thought of the cabin. It's the ideal place for them to hide the stuff until it's ready to go. I'll bet that's why Ricci first got nervous about my going out to the cabin. He went out to keep an eye on me and then he saw—" I glanced at her and decided not to mention what he saw. "What happened after that?"

"Mr. Holland went out," she said. "He told me he was going to arrange for a raid and that he'd be back by about two o'clock. He called me a little before two and said something had come up that would keep him out the rest of the afternoon. He still hadn't returned when I came home."

Just before two. That was just long enough after my visit to the Silver Lode and my phone call to Frankie to make it look like I had succeeded in stirring up something.

"When I knew he wasn't coming back," she said, "I went through the files on other raids. I thought maybe you'd like to know about them."

"Good girl," I said. "What did you get?"

She wrinkled her brow. "I don't know how much it helps," she said. "Mr. Holland has been arranging a raid regularly every three months. They've always taken place at midnight. There haven't been any arrests, but on one of the raids they found a small amount of heroin —" she looked at her notes—"in the house of a man named Zimmerman. But he'd left and they never found him. All the raids have been in the opposite direction from Mr. Menotti's cabin."

"It doesn't do anything but tie it all in neatly," I said. "The Zimmerman thing was probably a plant so that everybody would still be eager to go along on Holland's raids. What brought on the raids?"

"According to the records, it was an anonymous phone call each time."

"That fits."

"There was something else," she said. "There were notes in the file showing that each time a raid was planned, there were state policemen assigned to watch Ricci Menotti and all his men. There was never anything suspicious about their actions."

"Holland swears that Menotti is misunderstood but sees that he's watched each time?" I said. I grinned. "Sounds to me like he was using the state police to give Ricci an alibi in case anyone had ideas. They probably have a man coming in from the East—by plane, I'd guess—who goes and picks up the stuff while all the cops are busy elsewhere."

"Does it help any?" she asked.

"It helps a lot, honey," I said. "I've got to get out and take a good look at Ricci's cabin."

"Ciro," she said, a little shyly, "I thought of something else that might help."

"What, honey?"

"About four months ago," she said, "Mr. Menotti had a barbecue out at his cabin one afternoon. Mr. Holland asked me if I'd like to go with him and I did."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Nothing like that," she said. I thought she was going to blush, but she didn't quite make it. "This morning when Mr. Menotti said that the stuff was cool but you might make the cabin hot, I remembered something. In back of the cabin there was a huge freezer—almost as big as the cabin. It was filled with a lot of wild game. But that might be where he keeps the stuff, since he said it was cool."

"Sounds logical," I said. I grinned at her. "Baby, you're promoted to detective first class."

She seemed pleased.

"Now," I said, "I'd like to use your phone. I want to go out to the cabin, but I'd better try to check first to see if I've made them change their plans."

I walked into the living room, picked up the phone, and dialed Jay Crowley's number. He answered himself.

"Jay," I said, "I want you to use the power of the press to find out something for me."

"My particular press isn't always so powerful," he said. "But I'll try. What is it?"

"I think you can do this," I said. "You mentioned going to the police chief or the state police. I want you to call them and find out about a raid. Holland was planning one for tomorrow night, but it may have been changed. Call me back at this number." I gave him the number on Julie's phone.

"I can do that," he said. "Want me to meet you some place to give you the information?"

I knew he was referring to the fact that his phone was probably tapped. "No," I said. "It won't make any difference in this case. In fact, it might even help. Just phone me."

"Okay," he said.

I hung up and went over to sit on the couch. I held up my empty glass and Julie took it into the kitchen and brought it back filled. She sensed my mood and was quiet while I sat there waiting.

Finally the phone rang. I started for it, then realized it might not be my call. "You'd better take it," I said to her.

She answered and then held it out to me. "It's for you," she said.

I took the receiver from her. It was Jay.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"Never mind," I said. "What did you find out?"

"There was a raid set for tomorrow night, but it's been switched to tonight. At midnight."

I felt the way you do when you look down and find you're holding a royal flush. I had succeeded in making them push the date ahead. That meant their pick-up man wouldn't be here yet and they'd have to improvise. That was the way I wanted it.

"They're raiding a place down toward Henderson," he was saying.

"Where's that?" I asked.

"Toward Boulder City."

That fit. It was far away from Ricci's cabin.

"Holland's supposed to have received an anonymous phone call tipping him off that there's a cache of narcotics in a warehouse down there," Jay said. "It's going to be a big raiding party with city, county, and state police all participating."

"Who's leading the city contingent?" I asked. "Lieutenant Baker?"

"Oh, no. Lieutenant Cashman. He's the head of a special narcotics squad and a good man." His voice got careful. "You might be interested to know that some state men have been assigned to watch certain friends of ours."

"Fascinating," I said lightly. "But you don't have to whisper it. I think they know all about it. Well, thanks, Jay."

"What are you going to do now?" he asked.

"I think I know where the body's buried," I said. "I'm going out to dig it up. See you." I put the phone back on the hook.

"Well, that's it, Julie," I said. "I'll see you."

She came over quickly and put her hand on my arm. "Take care of yourself, Ciro."

"Sure," I said. "I'm the only me I've got. I'll take care."

"Come back here when you're through."

"Maybe," I said. I ran my fingers through her red hair and went to the door.

I drove across Stewart to Fifth Street and turned east. Out of habit, I kept one eye on the rear-view mirror. Once I thought I was being followed, but after several cars had cut between me and the headlights I was watching, I decided I was just being jumpy. I drove past the Nellis Base and turned right. At the second road branching off to the right, I turned again. I drove slowly, keeping my gaze on more than just the road. All the cabins out there were dark. Including Ricci's. I drove past it and turned the Cadillac around. I cut the motor and the lights.

I headed up through the woods toward the back of Ricci's cabin. I'd decided that Julie's thought was probably a good one. An outdoor freezer might be a good place to hide something like a shipment of dope.

The moon was bright enough so I could see where I was going, but I also had a flashlight. I reached the back of the cabin and looked around. I'd been through there once but that night I'd been in a hurry. There was the freezer, a squat square building directly back of the cabin. There was a tiny green light burning above the door, probably an indication that the freezer was operating. The back yard was terraced with plenty of flagstones around. There was a barbecue pit and something that looked like an old-fashioned well. I went over and pointed the flashlight down into it. There was water in it, too. Knowing Ricci, I had thought it might turn out to be a bar or some such trick gadget.

I went over to the freezer. There was a heavy padlock on it. That was probably natural, if he had a lot of meat stored in there, but it still made me feel I was on the right track. I studied the lock and decided to be simple and primitive. I went back down to the car.

When I returned I was carrying a heavy hammer. The cabin was isolated enough so that no one would hear me using it.

It took twenty minutes of pounding. It was beginning to be a toss-up which would give first, the lock or the hammer, when the lock finally let go. I pulled it from the hasp and tossed it away. I opened the door and went inside. I used the flashlight to find the switch and turned on the lights in the freezer.

There was enough meat there to feed a good-sized army. Whole carcasses of small deer and what looked like sheep and a whole wall of packaged meats. Each package was stamped with what was on the inside. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but I started poking through the freezer. It didn't take long to cover everything. There wasn't a damn thing there except frozen food. And I was starting to shiver with cold.

For no reason at all, I was convinced it had to be there somewhere. I began ripping open packages of meat at random. Then on the tenth shelf I hit pay dirt. I opened something that was supposed to be club steaks and I was looking at white powder. I put a little pinch of it on the end of my tongue. It was heroin.

There had been another shelf of club steaks. I went over and got a package from it and compared the two. There was a difference in the stamping. The one that had the heroin in it had a thin line under the word "club." After that it didn't take me long to find all of it and I soon had quite a pile of packages on the floor. I opened another one because it felt different. It turned out to be raw opium. The rest I left unopened.

It was quite a haul. I knew that this was all pure stuff. Once it was cut and sold on the retail market, it would probably be worth three million dollars. Maybe more.

No wonder everybody was so nervous and Frankie Carmel was sticking around but didn't want any publicity.

The question was what to do with it. I wanted to be sure they didn't cart it away, but on the other hand I didn't want to carry it off myself. I wanted it right there on Ricci's property so it could be tied to him. Then I had an idea. The dope was wrapped in regular freezer paper. That meant it was moisture proof. I started carrying the packages out and dropping them down into the well. I was being pretty impressed by my own cleverness.

There was one more trip to make and I'd be through. I'd just dropped a load in the well and was starting back to the freezer, grinning to myself. The grin was a little premature.

"Just hold it, Copper," a voice said.

I flicked off the flashlight and stood still. It didn't make any difference. There was still enough light for us to see each other. The moonlight glinted on the barrel of the gun in his hand.

"Hello, Eddie," I said.

"A smart sonuvabitch, ain't you, Copper," he said. "What was the idea of tossing the stuff in the well?"

"Trying to save you some work, Eddie," I said. "I was cutting it for you." I looked past him and didn't see anyone else. "Are you all alone?"

"I don't need anyone to help me take you," he said. "You know what I'm going to do to you, Copper? I'm going to shoot you in the belly where it'll take you a long time to die."

"A pretty thought," I said. "So Ricci's setting you up, is he, Eddie? Just like I predicted. You save his dope for him, but in the meantime you're the only guy without an alibi tonight. Where do you think that's going to leave you?"

"Skip it, Copper. Ricci knows I ain't going to cross him and I know he ain't going to cross me. Turn around and walk into the freezer. We're going to add some more cold meat to it."

I started for the freezer. I had about twenty feet in which to think of something and my mind was a blank. Then I stubbed my toe and almost fell.

"Watch it," he said sharply.

I looked down and saw the hammer at my feet. My heart started thudding with anxiety. I turned back toward him.

"What's making you so nervous, Big Shot?" I asked. "I stubbed my toe. Stop acting like I had one of those atomic cannons." As I talked, I worked the toe of my shoe into the angle made by the head of the hammer and the handle.

"Shut up and get into the freezer," he snapped.

I made as if to turn and kicked out with my foot, sending the hammer hurtling toward him. At the same instant, I threw myself backward and lit rolling. There were two fast gunshots and something tugged at my shoulder.

I came to a stop on my belly and my gun was in my hand. Eddie Trey, his face twisted in anger, was bringing his gun to bear on me.

There wasn't any time to be fancy. I pointed the gun in the general direction of Eddie and pulled the trigger.

He jerked a little and the anger faded from his face. He looked surprised. He seemed to forget all about the gun he held. Both hands went to his chest, and I could see something dark spurting between his fingers. He coughed once and then he went down in one movement, like a puppet when the strings are dropped.

I stayed right where I was until I could stop shaking. It took a little time. That had been a lot closer than I like to have anything be. Either there was a buzzing in my ears or I could still hear harps.

After a while I got up and went over to look at Eddie. He was dead, all right. I'd been looking forward to this, but now that it had happened it didn't do anything for me. I went over and sat down on the edge of the barbecue pit. My legs were still weak. I sat there, thinking about Eddie showing up so opportunely.

Suddenly something hit me. I was remembering how Eddie and Weeper Wade had been all set for me two nights before when I'd tried to get Eddie alone, and how Jay Crowley and Frankie Carmel had showed up and I'd thought they made a strange pair. Now Eddie had popped up where I was. I was remembering how a year before there had always been a leak, somebody close to the committee feeding information to Ricci Menotti. And a name popped into my mind. Jay Crowley.

I didn't want to think it. I tried to crowd it out, but it kept coming back. Jay was the only person I'd told about my idea for getting to Eddie Trey. Then Eddie and Weeper had showed up, just as if they knew what I was planning, to get the drop on me.

Jay was always crowding me to find out what I was going to do next. He'd been the only person, besides Julie, who knew where I was going this time. I hadn't named it to him, but I'd made it pretty obvious that I knew where the stuff was hidden and was going there. If he also knew where the stuff was, it would've been easy to phone Ricci and tell him I was heading for the cabin.

There was something else, too. Valda Menotti had appeared, pretending to be the person who'd written the letter, only after I'd told Jay all about it. There hadn't been much time in between but there had been enough to set that up.

Now it didn't seem so logical that Frankie Carmel would let a small-town newspaperman push him into doing something he didn't want to do. He might let someone who was in with the gang talk him into it, though. And what was a better front than that of the crusading newspaper publisher?

I felt sick. I liked Jay Crowley. I didn't want to believe any of those things, but they all seemed to fit. I buried my head in my hands and thought that it was a hell of a world.

That was my second mistake—putting my head in my hands. I was so busy feeling sorry for myself because I liked a guy who was maybe a crook that I didn't hear a sound. The first thing I knew there was a light shining on me.

"All right, Blake, get your hands up slow and easy. Don't make any quick moves." I would recognize that voice anywhere. It was Lieutenant Baker.

I raised my hands and my head at the same time. He was standing in front of me with a sawed-off shotgun trained on me. Somebody else was holding the flashlight. The glare kept me from seeing, but I suspected that it was his sidekick, Jim Drake. The lieutenant confirmed this.

"Circle around behind him, Jim," he said, "and lift his gun."

The flashlight blinked away and Jim walked around, coming up behind me. He reached and pulled my gun out of the holster. "Got it, Lieutenant," he said.

"Good. Take a look around. What are you doing here, Blake?"

"Communing with nature," I said sourly. I was annoyed at myself for being sneaked up on twice in one night. "Whenever I get to feeling the world is full of bastards, I come out and look at the trees. Makes me feel better to know that everything doesn't look like you."

"Hey," Jim shouted from off. "It's Eddie Trey. He's dead. And still warm."

"So that was the shots we heard," the lieutenant said. He sounded pretty satisfied. "You killed him, Blake?"

There wasn't much use of ducking this one. "Yeah," I said. "It was self-defense."

"That's what they all say," the lieutenant sneered. "Jim, check the freezer."

Suddenly I realized why they had showed up. I had known they were Ricci Menotti's men, but this development just hadn't occurred to me. And it made a lot of sense. Whenever there was a raid, the state cops watched Ricci and his men. But I'd bet they didn't watch the two who were on the police force. They made perfect delivery boys. They could pick up the stuff and deliver it in a police car to the pick-up man. Even if anybody saw them driving around, nobody would think anything of it.

Jim came out of the freezer faster than I'd ever seen him move before. He went up to the lieutenant and whispered to him.

"Not polite to whisper in company," I said.

"Shut up," Baker said. He sounded nervous now. I didn't blame him. I'd feel nervous, too, if I were supposed to pick up three million dollars' worth of something and it was missing when I got there. And he had another problem, I guessed. He wanted to ask me what I knew but he didn't want me to know what he knew.

"What're you doing here, Blake?" he asked again.

"I told you."

"Don't give me that stuff. What did you take from this place?"

"Is something missing?" I asked innocently.

He cursed to himself. "Jim, go down and look in his car."

Jim went blundering down through the woods. He was back in about five minutes.

"Nothing," he said.

The lieutenant hesitated, not knowing which way to step. "Well," he said finally, "we got you for breaking and entering and for the murder of Eddie Trey. That's enough to keep you on ice and then maybe we can find out what else happened here."

"What else do you think happened, Lieutenant?" I asked.

"None of your damn business," he snarled. He motioned with the gun. "Start walking around to the front of the house. Our car's there. We'll send somebody out later to pick up yours. Get going, Blake."

When I walked past him, he cuffed me with the barrel of the shotgun, but his heart wasn't in it. The lieutenant was a worried man.

We rode back into Las Vegas in silence. Jim drove and the lieutenant was busy with his thoughts, but not too busy to keep the shotgun pointed at me. When we reached the station, Baker absent-mindedly turned my gun over to the desk sergeant and booked me for breaking and entering and murder.

"I want to call my lawyer," I said.

He glared at me. "Maybe you can call him tomorrow," he said, "and maybe not. Now shut up. You're lucky I don't feel like working you over again."

He was probably right, but this time I felt I had a hole card. With Eddie Trey dead, I was the only person who knew where to find three million dollars' worth of heroin and opium. Something told me I was going to be very popular in the next few days if they guessed I knew it.

The turnkey came and the lieutenant turned me over to him. He led me back through a long corridor and unlocked a cell door. I walked in and the steel door clanged shut behind me.

CHAPTER 7

The bed in the jail wasn't as soft as the one in the hotel, but I slept through the night without any trouble at all. When I woke up the next morning, I was well on the way to recovery. The soreness in my body had subsided until it was no worse than if I had suddenly taken some unaccustomed exercise. The breakfast was pretty lousy, but I'd never heard of a jail with an imported chef so it wasn't any worse than I had expected.

I was in pretty good humor. It didn't even bother me that they hadn't let me telephone Big Joe Hennessey. I thought I had the whole thing masterminded and there was nothing to worry about. The way I figured it, they'd get word to Frankie Carmel and he'd know that I had to be the only person who knew where the stuff was. With three million dollars at stake, there was only one thing for him to do. If necessary, he'd set up proof that Eddie Trey committed suicide. Ricci Menotti would refuse to press the breaking and entering charge. I'd be out of jail but quick.

After that it would be up to me to figure out a way to bargain with Frankie so that I could still get Ricci. I wouldn't like the idea of turning even part of the narcotics over to Frankie, but I'd probably have to. Maybe I could still find a way to tip off the treasury men.

It looked very pretty the way I'd worked it out in my head. The only trouble was that all the pieces weren't in my head. I'd been right about one thing, though. I was about the most popular guy in that jail.

My first visitor came at nine o'clock that morning. The turnkey came shuffling down along the cells and peered in at me. He was an old man who looked as if he'd lost all interest in everything except just hanging on. He stopped in front of my cell.

"Blake?" he asked.

"That's me," I said. This, I thought, was going to be my first message from Garcia, alias Frankie Carmel.

"You got a visitor. I'll take you along to the visiting room." He fumbled with his keys.

"Who's the visitor?"

"Fellow named Jay Crowley. Newspaperman."

I remembered what I'd thought the night before and got the same sick feeling all over again. Maybe I'd been wrong and maybe I'd been right, but I knew that right then I couldn't look at Jay Crowley. I'd be afraid of what I might see. If he were Frankie's messenger, Frankie would just have to get another boy.

"Tell him I don't feel like seeing any visitors," I said.

He looked surprised, but after a minute he shuffled away. I sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to keep my mind off Jay Crowley. There were getting to be more things I couldn't think about. First the blonde and now Jay. In the meantime, some of the edge had been taken off my feeling that I had the world by the tail with a downhill pull.

I had some more of it taken off later. My next visitor, as it were, was on the house. He came down along the cells by himself without benefit of turnkey. He was the little cop I'd seen the night I met Lieutenant Baker. I fished around in my memory for his name and came up with it. Sergeant Sackley.

He stopped in front of my cell and felt in his pocket. He came out with a package of cigarettes which he tossed to me through the bars.

"Thought you might be running a little low on cigarettes," he said.

"Thanks," I said as I caught them.

"You know who I am?" he asked.

I nodded. "Sergeant Sackley. Right?"

There was a twisted grin on his face. "Detective Sackley as of yesterday," he said. "I tried to make something out of that business when they brought you in. There was nothing on the squeal book and the desk sergeant and Jim Drake both backed up the lieutenant's version. I got busted."

"I know how it is," I said sympathetically. "If I ever get out of here, I'll see that the real story goes on the record."

He nodded, but he didn't seem too interested. "I've been a cop fifteen years," he said. "Lots of people have funny ideas about cops. You take one crooked cop and people start thinking every cop is crooked. I've seen them come and go. Sometimes you can't do anything directly about them, you just have to let them trip themselves up. They always do it. Sometimes it's a little rough on everybody while you're waiting. But I still like being a cop."

"I know how it is," I said. I wondered if this was why he'd come to see me. I knew how tough it was for most cops whenever there was a crooked one in the saddle. They were always in the middle. They didn't like to sit still for it and they didn't like giving the picture of cops fighting cops.

"I remember when you were here last year," he said. "I liked the way you worked. Like a real cop, even though you weren't a regular."

"Thanks," I said gravely.

He fussed with the buttons on his coat. "Something's going on," he said. "I don't like it, but there isn't much I can do. Except bring you some cigarettes."

"Sure."

"I heard them talking this morning," he said. "Pretty soon they're going to give you a cell mate, a guy who's going to break out of jail some time this afternoon. He's going to want you to make the break with him. There'll probably be an outside man in on it, too. Only the lieutenant's going to have the best shot on the force stationed in a room upstairs watching the back for just such a break. I don't know what his orders are, but I can guess."

"Why?" I asked. This wasn't quite the way I had pictured it, and I was startled.

"They figure they got you cold on the Eddie Trey killing but they don't want you to come to trial. They're afraid you'll spill something. This way, they figure there won't be any outcry since they got you cold." He peered between the bars. "Did you kill Eddie Trey?"

"Yeah. In self-defense."

He nodded. "That Eddie Trey was a mean man with a gun. What about the blonde?"

"No," I said. "I was out from a mickey at the time. But I think Ricci did it. With my gun."

"Yeah. They were talking about the gun being important."

"Any news out on me yet?" I asked.

"Sure. They gave it out this morning. The *Plain Dealer* is taking the attitude that you did the community a service if you killed Eddie Trey and that you're innocent of everything else. All the others have you guilty right down the line."

Well, if it was in all the papers, Big Joe ought to be around soon. Suddenly I was more interested in seeing him. "Okay," I said. "I'll sit tight on any jail break."

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "Might not help any."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, but I can guess. You don't go along with the scheme, maybe the guy makes you go with him. Or maybe they come and get you and take you out to re-enact the murder. Who's going to know whether you made a run for it or not?"

He was right. If they were determined to have me killed while escaping there were a lot of ways it could be worked. "I see what you mean," I said dryly. "Any suggestions?"

"They're going to break out the back," he said. "Maybe in the excitement you could go another way. I don't think there'll be anybody in the front except the desk sergeant. He's a pretty good guy, only he's afraid of losing his job. Maybe a small bump on his head would help him think straighter. But I want you to do something for me, Blake."

"What?"

"Try to see that nobody hurts old Ed, the turnkey. He's been here for thirty years and he's a nice old guy."

"I'll see to it," I promised. "Where are you going to be, Sergeant?"

"Detective," he said automatically. He grinned. "I got me an assignment to look into something way off at the other end of town. It's going to take me all day."

"Don't blame you," I grunted. "You hear anything about a raid last night?"

"Yeah. Holland led a raid on an old abandoned warehouse. They didn't find anything but they claim there was evidence somebody had been using it to store dope. I'll see you around, Blake."

"I hope so," I said fervently.

I watched him walk away and then I sat down to think about the new situation. I didn't care for it. I still couldn't imagine Frankie Carmel letting three million bucks slip away. This left only two possibilities. Either Frankie didn't know what was going on or somebody had thought of looking in the well. It wasn't much of a choice.

My next visitor came fast on the heels of the detective. The turnkey shuffled down and said my lawyer wanted to see me. That made me feel better and I followed him along to a room just in front of the cell blocks. It was inside a second barred door so they didn't need any guards. He opened a door and motioned me into the room. He stayed outside and closed the door.

It was a small, white-washed room with a table and two chairs. And my lawyer. Only it wasn't Big Joe Hennessey. It was some young fellow I'd never seen before.

It wasn't much of a conference. He'd been sent by Big Joe and the idea seemed to be that Big Joe felt that he could do me more good by not openly appearing as my attorney before the trial. Big Joe was busy pulling wires. If everything was vague it was mostly because of the young lawyer. I got the feeling that Big Joe had given him the impression there wouldn't be any trial and he was confused. But he was proud to be associated with a man as important as ex-Senator Hennessey and he was eager to convince me that I was being taken care of in the grand manner.

At first I was annoyed, but then I began to understand it. Big Joe had probably sent him to me not so much as a lawyer but as a messenger boy to let me know he was busy. When I figured that out, I relaxed and the young man and I finally parted mutually reassuring each other.

The old man and I shuffled back to my cell.

The next event was my new cell mate. The old man brought him back, grumbling to himself about orders. I got the idea he didn't approve of locking the two of us together when there were plenty of cells. He wasn't aware of the wheels within wheels. He pushed the new arrival into my cell, locked the door, and went away, still grumbling.

We looked each other over like a couple of strange dogs who have been tossed into the same pen. He was a big guy, built along the same lines as Harry Manners, only he looked smarter. And tougher. He moved with a swing of his shoulders that indicated he knew how tough he was. The stamp of his profession was all over him, in the careful tightness of his face and in the way his eyes measured me. He was another killer, and I began to see what the little detective had meant by saying it might not be wise to refuse to escape.

I pulled out a package of cigarettes and took one. I looked at him a minute and finally held out the pack.

"Thanks, pal," he said. He took a cigarette. I lit mine and tossed him the matches. He tossed them back when he was through with them.

"A lousy town," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "But they're all lousy when you're on the inside."

He grinned, but it was no more than pulling the muscles in his face. "You a native?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Washington."

"I'm from Chi," he said. "You been around long, pal?"

"Too long," I grunted. I was going to play it straight.

"What makes with this town?" he said. "Everybody pitches me that it's wide open. I'm here two hours and they pick me up for packing a rod." He grinned. "I tell the bulls it's an old family heirloom but they ain't buying anything. What makes?"

"They're fussy," I said.

"Coppers," he said with disgust. "My name's Johnny Hardro."

"Ciro Blake," I said.

"What're you in for, pal?"

"Murder."

He tried to look surprised. "The big one, huh? Who'd you bump?"

"A guy," I said. I stared at him for a minute. "He was too curious about what I was doing."

"Sorry, pal," he said. "I didn't mean to start looking for any nose trouble. I was just wondering. Maybe you and me can do some business."

"How?"

He lowered his voice and got real confidential. "How'd you like to get out of here?"

"I'd like it," I said. "Maybe I'd do better doing business with a guy on the outside instead of one on the inside."

"Wait a minute," he said. "I got a pal here with me. They didn't get him when they picked me up. When the bulls were taking me away, I saw him and he passed me the high sign. He'll get here some time this afternoon, just as soon as he's cased the joint. When he does, I'm crashing out. Want to come along?"

"You seem pretty sure of your pal," I said. "Maybe he'll get cold feet. Cracking in and out of a jail ain't always as easy as some people believe."

"We've done it before when something went wrong. What makes you think it's so different in this crummy jail? He'll be here."

"Maybe," I said. "How do you think it'll work?"

"Once he's got the layout, he'll come to visit me, see. He'll strap a couple of guns around his legs down here." He slapped himself below the knees. "Even if he's frisked, they'll never find them. The old guy takes me up to the visiting room. We pull the guns, wrap up the old guy, and crash out the back way where my pal will have our car stashed. If you want to come along, we'll come back and get you first."

"What about a hideout?"

"We're going to shake this town so fast it won't see us," he said. "Maybe we'll try L.A. If you want to come along, okay. Otherwise you can find your own hideout."

"Sounds good," I said. "Count me in."

"Now you're talking, pal. We'll show these hick cops."

"Sure," I said.

After that the conversation lagged a little. He'd fixed the set-up and he couldn't think of anything else to say. Finally he muttered something about catching a nap before his pal arrived and climbed up to the upper bunk. I was just as well satisfied. His conversation wasn't that fascinating.

I still didn't like any part of it, but I didn't see any other solution. The test was going to come when we made the breakout. The other two guys were going to have guns. I didn't think they were going to slip me one. So what happened when we reached the point where they wanted to go one way and I wanted to go another? I lit another cigarette off the butt of the first one and tried to think of a brilliant answer.

I was still chewing at it thirty minutes later when the old man came hobbling back and unlocked the door.

"You got another visitor, Blake," he said. "You're real popular around here."

"Miss Jailbird of 1955," I said. "You think I ought to put on fresh make-up or go as I am?"

He cackled like an old hen. "Maybe you'll come back with make-up on," he said. "The visitor's a gal. A peach."

"That's for me, Pop," I said. "Lead on."

He locked the door after me and once more we made the trek to the visiting room. He opened the door and I went in.

It was Julie Lawrence. The old man had been right. I did collect some make-up, but the redhead wiped it off with her handkerchief after she had kissed me.

"I waited for you last night," she said.

"Sorry, honey," I said. "But as you can see, I suddenly got a previous engagement."

"Is it true," she asked, "all those terrible things they're saying about you in the newspapers?"

I grinned at her. "They forgot to deliver the papers to me this morning, but you can discount some of it. I did kill a guy named Eddie Trey, but that's all."

"What are they going to do to you, Ciro?"

"Nothing—it says here in small print," I said lightly. "I'm not quite sure how it'll work out yet, Julie, but something will turn up."

"Oh, that reminds me," she said. "I brought you something. I was so glad to see you I almost forgot about it." She fumbled inside her purse, then reached out and put a .32 revolver on the table. I did a double take.

"That's quite a surprise," I said. I picked it up and examined it. The serial number had been filed off. I broke it down and saw that it was fully loaded. "You sure you didn't also bake a cake with a couple of files in it?"

She laughed. "I didn't really think of it," she said. "Frankie Carmel sent it to you."

This was still more of a surprise. "Frankie?" I asked. "How did you happen to get into the delivery end?"

"When I discovered what had happened to you, I remembered that you had mentioned him. So I went to see him the first thing. I told him he had to do something for you and finally he told me to bring this to you. But—but what can you do with it here?"

"Target practice," I said dryly. "It helps to pass away the time in the cell. It was real nice of Frankie to think of me. No little messages with it or anything like that?"

She shook her head. "He just said to give it to you."

"Frankie never was very talkative," I said. I slipped the gun into my shoulder holster which they hadn't bothered taking off me. Come to think of it, they hadn't taken my belt or shoe laces either, as they usually do with anyone charged with murder. Maybe they'd been hoping I would hang myself. "Good old Frankie," I said. I didn't know whether to be pleased that he'd sent me the gun or annoyed that he was leaving it entirely up to me.

"I'd tell you to thank him for me," I said, "but I think it would be better if you stayed away from Frankie Carmel. He might start getting other ideas."

"Yes, Ciro," she said.

The visiting room of a city jail is hardly the place for light conversation between the sexes and it's definitely discouraging to any romance. So pretty soon I urged her to leave. I collected a last kiss and went back to my cell, rubbing the lipstick off on my sleeve.

The old man was more interested in my cosmetic problem than anything else, not that I expected him to notice that I was a little heavier under my left arm. Nobody was apt to frisk me again now, but I'd have to be careful that my cell mate didn't get a glimpse of the gun.

He was still doing his sleeping act, but he opened one eye as I came back into the cell.

"Somebody springing you?" he asked.

"No," I said. "A dame."

He gave out with a short monologue on what he could do if he only had a dame here in the cell. This was supposed to be normal man-talk in a jail so I didn't answer him. He pretended to go back to sleep.

I sat down on my bed and lit a cigarette. The pressure of the gun under my left arm made me feel a little better. At least it gave the first part of the answer to what I could do when it came to a parting of ways with my rescuers.

Lunch when it came was no better than breakfast had been. I ate part of mine and left the rest of it. My cell mate ate all of his, spent a few minutes reassuring me that we were going to break out any minute, and then went back to making like he was asleep. I was grateful for this even though I knew it was only that he wasn't up to any light chit-chat with a guy he was framing.

I went back to sitting on my bed and smoking. I had nothing to do but wait. Or so I thought. But I was soon to discover that my popularity was far from waning.

The old man started cackling to himself this time even before he reached the cell door.

"You're a one, you are, Blake," he said as he unlocked the door. "There's another one to see you. No bigger'n a minute, but she's a peach, too." He yakked it up some more. "Reminds me of when I was a young feller."

We reached the visiting room and I went in. It was Carla, but I'd figured that when he said she wasn't any bigger than a minute. Besides, I didn't know any other women in Las Vegas.

She didn't offer to kiss me. I think she might have, but she probably had the same feeling about jails I did.

"Hi, Buster," she said. "How's life on the other side?"

"Confining," I said with a grin.

"I've been thinking about you," she said. She had that impish grin on her face, and something about the way she was looking at me made me feel better than if she had kissed me. "I think if you get out of here, we'd better reform you."

"Meaning?"

"Maybe plumbing would be the thing for you," she said. "I've just been running over the record. You've been here about four days. Right?"

"Something like that."

"And what's happened? You got yourself framed for murdering a blond babe, you got beat up by thugs, you got beat up by cops, now you're in the keister for murder. Looks to me like you do your detective work the hard way."

"That's my girl," I said. "Filled with admiration and respect."

"I take it that you're guilty of the murder charge," she said. "Otherwise you'd be protesting and wailing all over the place."

"I did it with my own little .32," I admitted. "Nobody's asked me up to now, but it was only after he did this." I pointed to my right shoulder where Eddie Trey's first bullet had removed part of the cloth.

"That's something in your favor," she said, cocking her head on one side. "Not smart, but lucky. For example, what would you do without me?"

"Hang myself," I said promptly. "I had already planned to do it at two o'clock if you didn't show up."

"I ignore the unseemly levity," she said. She opened her purse. "For this, I expect the Badge of Merit from the Gun Molls of America." She took a gun out of her purse and put it on the table.

It was a .38. I picked it up and looked at it. It was loaded. The numbers had been filed off. I looked at it long enough to be sure my surprise wouldn't show.

"You made it yourself?" I asked politely. "Out of an old bed spread?"

"In a way," she said. "I made Frankie Carmel give it to me."

Frankie was certainly getting generous with guns. Either that or he was absent-minded. Or somebody was lying like hell.

"In honor of a special occasion?" I asked. "Or was it just an idle whim on Frankie's part? 'Here, kid, I haven't given you anything in a long time' type of thing?"

"Very funny," she said. "I remembered your telling me about Frankie Carmel, so I figured he could do a lot more about getting you out than some lawyer. I went up to see him. He said he wouldn't lift a finger to help get you out of hell. I said if he didn't do something I'd go tell Ricci Menotti about his conversation with you. We argued back and forth and I finally told him the least he could do was give me a gun to take to you so you could get yourself out of jail. He laughed and called me a fresh broad but he gave me the gun. You think he meant anything personal when he called me a fresh broad?"

"It was probably just a passing insight," I said. "How could he tell you were a fresh broad on such short acquaintance?"

We both laughed, but I was still worrying about my sudden embarrassment of riches. Everybody seemed to be wanting me to get shot or to shoot somebody else.

"What's next?" she asked. "Want me to wait outside with the getaway car?"

I had a hunch she wasn't entirely kidding. "No, no," I said hurriedly. "You just run along home. If you can't find anything else to do, knit me a sweater."

I tucked the second gun into the top of my pants where my coat would hide it. I felt like a walking arsenal. I buttoned my coat and put one arm around her.

"Thanks, kid," I said. "You run along now. Keep a light burning in the window of the morgue."

For the first time, her face softened. "Take care, Buster," she said.

"Just like it was all real," I said. I went out to where the old man was waiting. He looked at my face and I think he was disappointed.

"No smooching this time?" he said.

"Gee," I said, snapping my fingers, "she was so busy slipping me guns and files and TNT that I completely forgot to kiss her."

He went off into his high-pitched cackle and I was forgiven for not having lipstick smeared all over me.

My cell mate opened that one eye again as I came in. He was a light sleeper.

"Another dame," I said before he had to exert himself. "They won't leave me alone."

"You're lucky, pal."

"That's what she said." I hurried over to my bed to get out of sight of him. I was so conscious of the two guns I felt like a pregnant woman in the middle of a beauty parade.

I wasn't so sure about the lucky part, either. The business of the two guns had me worried. And I didn't like the idea of thinking that one of the two girls had lied, but it was obvious. The question was which? And why?

In the meantime, all I could do was wait for the phony breakout to get under way. At least, I thought, I was through with visitors. I couldn't have been more wrong.

The old man came back, but he was beginning to get a little tired of it himself. It was probably more work than he was used to doing.

"Another visitor for you, Blake," he said.

"Who?"

"He didn't give no name. At least not to me." He was holding the door open. "Come on. I got other things to do besides just walking you back and forth."

"Sorry, Pop," I said. "I guess I sent out too many invitations."

He didn't think I was so funny this time, so I followed him down the corridor without trying any more.

"Make it fast," he said as he opened the door.

I thought the two guns had at least exhausted my surprises for the day, but I was wrong on that, too. My visitor was Weeper Wade.

"Well," I said, "this is a surprise. Don't tell me that Ricci Menotti is bailing me out."

He shook his head sadly. "I don't like it," he said. "Things are going all to hell. Wish I was back in New York."

"What's the matter, Weeper? You want to move in with me?"

"No gags, Ciro," he said. "When a gang starts fighting among themselves and a guy like me goes to see a private cop who's in the can, things are going to hell."

"Tell me more. I'm very interested."

He gazed at me with the expression of a professional mourner. "I ain't working for Ricci no more."

"How come?"

"Like I said. I ain't sure I'm working for anybody. All I know is that Frankie Carmel and me is going fishing and I ain't been fishing since I was a kid in Brownsville."

"You and Frankie are going fishing," I said. "You should have told me earlier. I would've sent you a copy of *The Compleat Angler*. Did you come to invite me along?"

"Frankie told me to see you," he said. He pulled at one ear and looked uncomfortable. I could understand. This was a new role for Weeper. Usually when he was sent to see someone it meant they were due for the big sleep. "You killed Eddie Trey," he said. It was a statement, not a question.

"Yeah," I said. "He had the drop on me but I was lucky."

"I've heard you're good with a gun," he said. I understood the way he was looking at me. He was wondering if it would have been different if he'd come after me the night before. "Eddie was careless. He always thought he had to do things a certain way. I tried to tell him shoot first and get fancy later."

"Eddie liked to be fancy," I agreed. "That why Frankie sent you over?"

"He wanted you to know he was going fishing. You got what he sent over?"

I nodded. There was no point in telling Weeper I'd been twice blessed. It wouldn't do to worry Frankie when he was going fishing. It was my problem.

"You in on the breakout this afternoon?"

"I'm in on all of it," I said.

"Frankie wondered if you'd tumble to it," he said. "But either way, he figured a rod might come in handy. You know about the missing stuff?"

This was no time to be coy. "I know about it," I admitted.

"Four million dollars' worth," Weeper said mournfully.

So I'd been a million dollars off on my guess, but what's a million dollars among friends? "A lot of cabbage," I said.

"Frankie's annoyed."

"Makes sense," I said.

"Trouble in the gang and four million bucks missing. Frankie's laid down the law. Either they find the stuff or they're all through."

"And underground?"

"Yeah. Ricci swears he'll find it. He figures you didn't have time to cart it off last night and that you hid it some place around his joint. He says he'll find it or tear the whole joint up."

"Ricci finds it and he'll be in good with Frankie again?"

"I don't think so," Weeper said. "But Frankie figures on letting him try."

I had a thought. "That's why Frankie is willing for me to make a different breakout than Ricci planned for me. He thinks maybe I'll bird-dog the way to the four million bucks and then maybe I'll take care of Ricci on top of it. That the way it is?"

"Something like that," Weeper admitted.

"Then later Frankie comes back and picks up the pieces after everybody else has done the dirty work," I said. "What happens if I don't play?"

"Frankie wouldn't like it."

The whole thing began to make sense now. Nobody was going to bargain with me. Frankie figured that one way or another I'd point out the place I'd stashed the narcotics. Somebody else figured the same thing. That was why I had two guns.

"I'm going to play," I told Weeper, "but not because Frankie will be sore if I don't. I'm beginning to like the game. You and Frankie go do your fishing, but be sure you put the hook on the right end of the line."

"No gags, Ciro," Weeper said. "It ain't funny." He looked at me sharply. "No crosses."

"Me?" I said lightly. "How could a dumb private eye like me double-cross a big man like Frankie Carmel? You've been seeing too many gangster movies, Weeper."

"Always gags," he said sadly. "Frankie told me to tell you something else so he'll be sure that you don't decide to take a walk when you get out of here. Ricci's got the broads."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Ricci's got the broads. The redhead and that little dark-haired doll."

"Where? How? They were both here, one of them not more than a half hour ago. How do you know?"

"We know," he said. "Ricci picked them both up as they left here. Frankie thinks that Ricci is really flipping his lid and it's liable to be messy was you to leave them with him."

I could feel the anger welling up in me until I was shaking with it. "Maybe," I said coldly, "Frankie even suggested to Ricci that he pick them up. Maybe that was Frankie's way of making sure that I go after Ricci."

"Maybe," he said.

"There's one little thing you and Frankie can think about while you're fishing," I said. "If anything happens to either of those girls, I'm coming for you and Frankie. Remember that."

His eyes were measuring me again.

"You're good, Weeper," I said softly. "But I can take you. Maybe one of you can get me while I'm doing it, but I can stay on my feet long enough to put a bullet in Frankie's belly. And I will."

I went out without waiting for him to answer. The old man and I trudged back to the cell.

"If anybody else comes," I told him, "tell them I'm not home."

He managed a small gurgle of laughter but that was all. He locked me in and went away. My cell mate's one eye popped open again.

"My lawyer," I said shortly. "He wanted me to cop a second degree plea. I told him to go screw."

"Them mouthpieces are all alike," he said.

I grunted and crawled into my bed. This time I did the imitation of going to sleep. Not that I felt like it. I was ready to go. I could feel the tension knotting my stomach.

It was maybe an hour later that the old man shuffled back to say there was a visitor for my cell mate. He jumped off the upper bunk. The old man started unlocking the door.

"Johnny," I said.

He turned back to look at me.

"When you take over up there," I said, speaking low enough so the old man couldn't hear me, "save the old man for me. I got a small score to settle with him."

"Sure," he said. "I thought you looked a little hot under the collar when you came back that last time." He turned and swaggered out.

I sweated out the next few minutes. Then I heard the footsteps coming back down the corridor. I jumped off the bed and checked to see that my two guns weren't showing.

There was a mean-looking little guy outside with my cell mate. They both had guns out and the old man, his face a pasty white, was walking ahead of them.

"Unlock the door, Pop," Johnny Hardro ordered.

The old man's hands were shaking so badly he had trouble getting the key in the lock, but he finally made it. The door swung open and I walked out.

"Blake," Johnny said, "this is Pete Gitel."

"Glad you could make the party, Pete," I said. I nodded at the old man. "He unlock up front yet?"

"Not the outer door," Johnny said.

"I'll wait until then," I said.

We started back down the corridor, the old man in front, then the two guys with the guns, and finally me. They didn't suspect me of having a gun so they didn't care that I was behind them.

We reached the last gate and the old man unlocked it. I was all ready for them. I had the .32 in my right hand and the .38 in my left. I put the muzzles up against the backs of their necks.

"Just freeze, boys," I said. "Don't even breathe."

"What the hell—" Johnny Hardro started to say. I nudged a little harder with the gun barrel and he stopped.

"Drop the hardware," I said.

The two guns clattered to the floor.

"Now," I said, "we're all going to march back to the cells. You first, Pop. Then you two hot shots from Chi. About face."

We all swung about and started back.

"What the hell's eating you?" growled Johnny. "We're good enough to cut you in on a bustout and you pull a double cross like this. You blow your top or something?"

"Save your breath," I told him. "I'm not in a very good humor. I don't like a couple of mugs who want to set me up as a clay pigeon for a cop sharpshooter in the back yard."

"Where the hell'd he get the rods?" Pete mumbled. "I thought they said—"

"Shut up," Johnny snapped.

"Johnny's right," I said.

We reached the cell with the open door. I prodded them inside and told them to stand still. Then I swung the .38 twice. The barrel made a lovely sound on their skulls. They folded up.

"Pop," I said to the old man, "you're a problem. I promised someone I wouldn't hurt you. If I lock you in one of your own cells, will you promise not to start yelling the minute I'm out?"

"Won't say a word," he said eagerly. "Not a word."

"Okay," I said. "Lock this cell up and then unlock one of the others." He quickly obeyed me and I locked him in the cell. I put the keys in my pocket and stuck the .32 back in my holster. Carrying the .38, I went up front.

The desk sergeant was sitting out there by himself. He was reading a comic magazine and it looked like it was hard going. I could see him forming the words with his mouth. I came up behind him.

"That you, Pop?" he asked without looking up from his comic.

I picked out a spot just above his right ear and rapped the barrel of the .38 against it. He fell forward on his desk without a sound. He'd have a good-sized lump on his ear, but that would be all. I tucked the gun into the waist of my pants and walked out the front door.

I was in no mood for fooling around. The way it stood, it wouldn't make much difference what I did. They had me for murder, breaking and entering, breaking out of jail, assaulting an officer—it wouldn't hurt to add a little car theft. When it was all over, I'd be out of it or they'd throw the key away.

I went down the street until I found a car with the keys in it. I climbed in and drove off. I drove out Route 93 as fast as I could without running the risk of getting a speeding ticket.

I parked the car at the second cabin on the road that led to Ricci's place. I cut out through the fields to circle Ricci's cabin and come up on the other side. It took me a half hour, but at last I was sneaking up through the woods on the other side of his place.

There was plenty of activity, all right. There were four men in sight. Ricci, Harry Manners, Lieutenant Baker, and Jim Drake. It looked as if they'd dragged every bit of food out of the freezer. There were opened packages of food all over the back yard. They'd also dragged out the frozen carcasses, and Jim was chopping them up with an axe. Harry Manners was busy knocking the barbecue pit to pieces, and the lieutenant was chipping away at the well top. Ricci was walking back and forth and swearing. All of them were wearing guns and there were a couple of shotguns laying on the ground.

Ricci went over and said something to Harry Manners. Then he slugged him. Harry took it and only looked reproachful. But it looked like Ricci *was* flipping his lid.

They hadn't found the dope yet. There was still time to take care of them. I wanted to check on something else. I turned and went back through the woods to the road. I went along carefully, sticking close to the woods, until I made sure there was nobody posted in front of the cabin. Then I went up and looked through the window.

The blinds were drawn, but I finally found a window where one slat of the Venetian blind was crooked and I could see into the living room. It took some maneuvering around, but I finally found what I was looking for. Carla Blane and Julie Lawrence.

They sat side by side, tied to their chairs. They looked as if they'd already had a rough time. Their clothes were so badly torn that both girls were bare almost to the waist. Their make-up was well smeared, which probably meant they had been slapped around. They were conscious, but neither one looked as though she had much pep.

The anger flared up in me until I was shaking again. It was all I could do to keep from kicking in the window and going in to untie them. But I knew that could be one way of making sure they never got loose. One slip now and it would all be over.

I tried to shut the sight out of my eyes as I moved away from the window. I slipped around to the side of the house. It was touchy going, but I had to get myself in a better spot. I'd never have a chance if I tried to tackle the four of them out in the open.

Finally I found the window that looked into the bedroom—the room where Valda had been killed. I tried to remember the way she'd looked and was surprised to find that I couldn't. Maybe the newer picture of the two girls in the living room had blotted it out. But I couldn't remember and there was no pain: I was sorry that she'd been killed. Maybe she'd been a tramp and all the things she'd been called, but she had deserved something better than she got. But that was all I felt.

The window was locked. Next to it was a bathroom window, but it was also locked. I went back to the bedroom window, and found that it was kept closed with the usual type of fastener on the inside. All I had to do was figure out some way to get to it. A glass cutter would have helped, but I didn't have one.

I reached up and yanked a strip of adhesive from my face. It hurt a little coming off because I still hadn't shaved. I pressed about half of it against the pane of glass near the top, just above the lower half. I tested it. The adhesive felt like it would hold.

Using the butt of the .38, I struck a sharp blow on top of the adhesive. The glass cracked, but didn't break. The adhesive had deadened the sound of the blow; I knew it hadn't carried far.

One more blow did it. A jagged piece of glass as big as my hand broke out and hung dangling from the strip of adhesive. It swung out and back, rapping against the window, but the sound wasn't loud enough to carry more than a few feet. I drew the piece of glass carefully out through the hole and placed it on the ground. I reached through the hole and unlocked the window. It opened without a sound, and I climbed in and gently eased the window shut.

"I tell you I heard something," Julie was saying. Her voice sounded strained, as though she were close to tears. "Like somebody tapping against the window."

"Probably a bird," Carla said. She was making it sound light, but I could hear the effort in her voice. "Doesn't know when it's well off, trying to get in here."

"I wish Ciro would come," Julie said. "Maybe he won't get here. Maybe they've already killed him."

"He'll come," Carla said confidently.

"You don't know what they're like," Julie cried. "I wish—"

"Wish what?" Carla said when she broke off.

"Nothing," Julie said. She sobbed softly.

I looked around the bedroom. It had been cleaned up since that night four days ago. Everything was neat and in its place. But someone had left one of the sliding doors of the closet partly open. I could see the rackful of dresses and coats. I thought of the girls in the other room with their torn clothes, and went over and fumbled in the closet until I found two coats. Maybe they wouldn't fit too well, but they'd be better than nothing.

The coats smelled of Valda's perfume as though some part of her still lived in them, but her fragrance no longer bothered me.

Carrying the coats, I went over to the door leading into the living room. I stopped to listen. Then I cursed softly to myself. I heard the back door opening. Somebody was coming in. I wanted to get them in the house, but I had hoped to get the girls loose first.

There was a sound of voices, so there were at least two of them.

"—and that covers everything back there," Ricci was saying, "except the bottom of the well. There's twenty feet of water in there, but Harry'll soon be back with a gasoline pump and it won't take long to clean it out."

There was the sound of a motor starting up in front of the house, then of a car pulling away. From what Ricci had just said that must be Harry Manners leaving. I was glad, not only because it cut down the odds. Harry was just a big, stupid jerk and I didn't have any special reason to hate him.

"I still think we made a mistake, Ricci." That was Lieutenant Baker. They were in the living room now, I could tell by their voices, but I didn't risk a look. "We should've brought that Blake out here and made him tell us where he hid the stuff."

"To hell with him," Ricci said violently. "He's the kind of jerk who wouldn't talk no matter what we did to him. And he's too lucky. Better that we have him on a slab. You think he's dead yet?"

"Must be," Baker said. "Johnny and Pete were supposed to pull the breakout an hour ago, and Anderson couldn't miss at that range."

"What if Blake didn't go for the breakout?"

"Johnny was going to kill him right in the cell and then beat it. We can depend on Johnny and Pete. They're good men."

"They'd better be," Ricci growled. "In the meantime, maybe we won't have to wait for Harry to get back with the pump. Blake must've been shacking up with both these girls and one of them must know where he hid the stuff. Want to make it easy, girls, or shall we do it the hard way?"

"Go to hell," Carla said.

Good girl, I thought.

"Okay," Ricci said. "We'll do it the other way. Jim."

"Yeah," said the third voice. It was the big cop with the peculiar ideas of fun.

"Go to work on them."

"Sure, Ricci," he said eagerly. "Which one first?"

"Either one," Ricci said. "No, wait. Take the big broad first. Maybe when you get her talking she'll tell us where her other friend is."

"You bet, Ricci," Jim said. He sounded as happy as a kid with a handful of lollypops. I heard him shuffle across the floor and then Julie screamed.

I stuck my head around the door and took a look. The big cop was standing in front of Julie, a loose grin on his face. He was holding a lighted cigar, and the glowing end was about an inch away from one of the redhead's breasts. He was slowly moving it closer.

I lifted the .38 and pulled the trigger. A small hole appeared, like magic, where his nose had been. His head jerked back from the impact, his body spun around and went over with a crash that shook the room. Julie screamed again.

But I didn't wait to watch any of this. Even as Jim was falling, I went into the room fast. Ricci and Lieutenant Baker were standing maybe fifteen feet apart and they were both going for their guns.

There wasn't much time to make a choice, but I made one. I wanted Ricci Menotti alive. I needed him alive to clear myself. I ignored the lieutenant and concentrated on Ricci. I steadied the .38 carefully. Ricci had his gun half out of its holster before I pulled the trigger. The bullet caught him high in the right shoulder, just where I wanted it, spinning him around and smashing him up against the wall.

Even as I whirled to face the lieutenant, his gun crashed. Something burned across my left side. Then I could see Baker, and the .38 was swinging into line. I knew I was moving fast, but it seemed like slow motion. I could see his finger tightening against the trigger for a second time.

I wanted the lieutenant alive, too, but there was no time to pick and choose. He'd almost gotten me with that first shot and I didn't dare spot him another one. The bore of his gun looked as big as the mouth of a cannon. I shot.

The front of his shirt, where it stretched tautly across his belly, jumped as though it had been caught in the wind. He stumbled backward and sat down on the floor.

His gun clattered as it dropped from his hand. His face was screwed up in pain and there was a dazed look in his eyes. Red petals crawled out across his white shirt.

I wheeled back to face Ricci. He was leaning against the wall, his face white and pasty, thin trickles of spittle running down from either corner of his mouth. He was trying to reach his holster with his left hand.

"Stop it, Ricci," I said.

He acted as if he hadn't heard me, his arm still doubled back on itself, the fingers clutching at the butt of the gun. His lips were twisted back from his teeth, and there was a wild look in his eyes. I thought Big Joe had been right about Ricci's sanity.

"Ricci," I said sharply, "stop it. I'll put the next bullet through your kneecap."

This time he heard me and his hand dropped to his side. But the expression on his face didn't change.

"Move over and untie the girls," I ordered. "But make every motion as if your life depended on it. Because it does."

There was a gentle thump. I looked around. The lieutenant had fallen over. I swung my gaze back to Ricci.

"Get going," I said.

He sleep-walked across to the girls and started untying them with his left hand. I don't think he saw what he was doing, but his fingers worked independently of him and the ropes fell from the girls. Ricci stepped back, his gaze never leaving my face. He made no move to wipe away the saliva which still ran down his chin.

The girls stood up. Julie's face was working as if she were about to cry, but no tears came. As she stood up, she automatically crossed her arms over her bare breasts. But Carla stood straight, almost proudly, a tremulous grin on her gamin face.

"I knew you'd come, Buster," she said. "You're the romantic type. I knew you wouldn't let Ricci get away with anything worth four million dollars."

"Just a slip of the vowels," I said. "I can never tell the difference between heroine and heroin." I shifted around so Ricci wouldn't be out of my sight.

"You all right, Buster?" she asked.

"I'm fine," I said. My side was hurting like hell, but there was no point in letting her know. "If you'll look by the door, you'll find a couple of coats. They may not be custom fit, but they'll cover the essential points."

"What you said," Carla muttered.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw them get the coats and slip them on.

"Now get out of here," I said. "If you walk down the road, you'll find a car parked at the next cabin. The keys are in it. You can drive it back to town, but when you get there you'd better ditch it. It's hot. Go see Jay Crowley at the *Plain Dealer*. Tell him I'm sorry." It wouldn't make sense to Jay, but it would to me. It was for ever thinking he could be mixed up with this gang. "Tell him to send some honest cops out here as fast as he can."

"Okay," Carla said crisply.

"Ciro," Julie said. It was the first time she'd spoken. Her voice sounded hoarse and uncertain. "Ciro, I knew you'd come, too."

I looked at her, staring at the candid blue eyes and the long red hair. But that wasn't what I was seeing. I was suddenly remembering her the way she'd looked in bed in her apartment and linking that picture with something I'd heard.

"You're just a peroxide blonde," I said flatly. I shifted my gaze back to Ricci. "Now get out of here, both of you."

I heard them go to the door and then I thought of something else. "Carla," I said.

"Yes?"

"Come here."

She came across and stood beside me. I put the gun in my left hand and pulled the .32 from my shoulder holster. I handed it to her. "Take care of yourself, kid," I said.

"You, too, Buster," she said. She turned and left. A moment later the door closed behind them. Ricci and I stared at each other across the room.

"Four million dollars is a lot of money, Ricci," I said. "The Syndicate doesn't like your being so careless with their money. You know they're dumping you? You're all by yourself, Ricci."

He made a noise in his throat.

"I would never have found it, Ricci," I said carefully, "if you hadn't talked too much when you called Holland yesterday to arrange the raid."

His face worked and the noise in his throat became words. "You're nuts," he said. "All I said to Holland was 'Tomorrow night.' You're trying to cover. Maybe you think I don't know about the double cross. I tried to tell Frankie but all he said was that it was still my problem. I ain't through yet. You ain't stopping me." He seemed to be having trouble breathing and his left hand clawed at his throat. "You know what I'm going to do when I get my hands on that dirty, double-crossing sonuvabitch of—"

The gun went off right beside my ear, sounding like a cannon. It was a surprise, but not as big a surprise as it might once have been. I didn't even wait to watch Ricci fall. I knew he'd had it. I whirled around, chopping down with the barrel of the .38. It cracked across Big Joe Hennessey's wrist and his gun dropped to the floor.

He tore his gaze away from Ricci Menotti and looked at me, rubbing his wrist where I'd hit it. "What's the matter, son?" he asked gently. "He was going for his gun. I stopped him from shooting you." He started to bend down to pick up the gun on the floor.

"Hold it," I said sharply. He stood up and stared at me. "Ricci Menotti wasn't going to pull anything but your name out of his mind. That's what you stopped him from doing."

"Maybe you forget who I am," he said.

"I don't forget anything," I told him. "You're Big Joe Hennessey. The former Senator Hennessey. A big man in this state. The People's Choice. A pillar of society. And the number one man for the Crime Syndicate in the West."

He sighed heavily. "You've had a tough time the last few days," he said patiently. "We'll mark it up to that and forget all about it." He started to reach again.

"You touch that gun and so help me I'll shoot," I said.

He stood up again. His face was beginning to look strained.

"I'm stupid plenty of times," I said, "but that doesn't mean I'm stupid all the time. I knew, when I was coming out here, that you'd probably be nosing around somewhere. I should have guessed that you were in the closet when I saw the door partly open. Everything else was so neat. What would you have done if I'd touched you when I reached in for the coats? Shot me?"

"I'll admit that I was hiding in the closet," he said, "but that hardly makes me a criminal."

"I should have realized it a long time ago," I said. "You were the reason everything leaked a year ago. You were the good old friend of Senator Andrews, so it was perfectly natural for him to discuss everything with you when you got together in the evenings. And you were the special advisor to the state committee, so you always knew what they were going to do. And because of that I came along this time and blabbed everything to you. Very neat."

He shook his head. "You've been working too hard, son."

"Not hard enough, you mean," I said. "I should have guessed it had to be somebody like you when Frankie Carmel told me that Ricci wasn't the number one man around here. I should have caught the two slips you made right away instead of only seeing through them this afternoon."

"Slips?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "One was that day when you knew I'd already contacted Julie and you told me playfully to be careful about blondes. I didn't know any blondes except Valda, and she was dead, and I wondered what the hell you were talking about. Then the other night I realized that Julie was just a blonde and not a redhead, but it didn't soak in until today."

He gave a humorless grin. "I said that you had a way with women," he said.

"And you and I had the same taste in women, didn't we?" I said. "Was Julie your mistress as well as Valda? A sly old goat, aren't you?"

He winced under that one.

"Your second mistake was more open," I said, "but I didn't catch up with it until today either. That was when you came to rescue me from Ricci's tame cops and you said you'd learned from Carla that Eddie Trey and Weeper Wade had beaten me up. I had told Carla that I'd been beaten, but I hadn't told her who did it. I hadn't mentioned any names. But you knew."

"It's really very simple," he said patiently. "I knew that those two did all the rough work for Menotti."

"Sure," I said. "But you know I still didn't think about you, or even pay any attention to Frankie's remark that Ricci was not number one, until Weeper Wade visited me in the jail today. Weeper is a real old-time gunman. He takes a twisted kind of pride in his profession. He was upset because the members of the gang were fighting each other. But Frankie wasn't fighting anybody. He was waiting to pick up the pieces. That meant Ricci and somebody else, the number one man. You were the only other person who was actively interested. It had to be you."

"It doesn't sound like much proof," he said lightly.

"It was enough for me," I said. "I think I can fill in the blank parts. Ricci had been getting out of hand lately. He didn't always remember you were the boss. And he had one big advantage; he had his own men. You, because you always stayed out of sight, didn't have any strong-arm men to fall back on. All you had were your orders, and when Ricci stopped jumping, it didn't leave you with much. You had one open clash with Ricci about six months ago in his club. I've been told you're the kind of man who never forgets something like that. This was doubly so when it concerned your position in the Syndicate. Right so far?"

"Go on," he said gently.

"It was right after that," I said, "that Julie Lawrence went to work for Holland. You planted her there, didn't you? You knew about the connection between Holland and Ricci and thought she'd make a good listening post. After a while you had her write a letter to the state committee—the one to which you were a special advisor. Then you told them to hire me. You thought that I was just the boy to get Ricci for you—under your guiding gaze, of course. When I didn't make headway fast enough, you even had Julie tip me off on where to find the narcotics. You'd reached a point where you were even willing to hurt the Syndicate to get your way. That was a mistake."

He stared at me without saying anything.

"I'll bet," I said, "that Frankie suspected some hanky-panky on your part as well as on Ricci's. Oh, yes, it was also you who sent Julie to me today with a gun and the story that she'd gotten it from Frankie. You didn't know that Frankie was going to send me a gun, too. You had to help me to get out so I could be used against Ricci, but you didn't want me to know you were in it. Frankie also wanted me out, to be used against both you and Ricci. He figured that one of you would be eliminated and that the other one would recover the narcotics and eliminate me. I don't think he cared which one."

I stopped and looked at him.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"Those are the high points," I said. "Care to tell me how right I am?"

"It's ridiculous," he said firmly. "You don't think anyone will believe you, do you?"

"I think they will," I said easily. "A lot of it is circumstantial evidence, but you're forgetting one thing, Big Joe. The weak spot is Julie Lawrence. She's just been through a bad time. And there are other reasons. Sure, she helped you play me for a sucker, but things have changed a little. You're an old man. She's beginning to like me. She'll talk, and don't make any mistake about it."

For the kind of man he was, it was brutal. His face went dead white and he stared at me without speaking. But somewhere within him there was enough intelligence to make him realize that what I'd just said was the truth. Maybe he'd heard the pleading in her voice when she spoke to me just before she left. Whatever made him do it, he did face the truth and he suddenly aged right before my eyes. His face sort of fell in and he looked old and flabby.

He glanced at the gun on the floor and then looked up at me. His eyes were calculating.

"If you reach for it," I said, "I'll shoot. But not to kill. Through the kneecap. Where it hurts like hell."

"Why?" he asked through bloodless lips.

"There's been too much killing already," I said. "And for another thing, I need you. You killed my main chance to prove that I had nothing to do with the murder of Valda Menotti. I've got a lot of charges against me. I need you to get them cleared."

His chin had fallen on his chest and he was staring off into space. I thought I knew what he was seeing—the crashing end of a long career of being thought an important and respectable man.

"There's one thing I'd like to know," I said. "You engineered this whole thing to get Ricci. But how did Ricci find out about it? He had to know I was coming since he sent Valda over to pretend to be the girl who'd written the letter."

"It was Valda," he said. His voice, too, was now that of an old man. "It amused me to have her around, but I had no illusions about her. She liked being on all sides. I knew she carried tales to her husband, just as she told me things about him. She was at my house one day when I talked to a state senator about the letter. When I'd finished the conversation, I heard the click of the extension phone. I knew it was Valda, although she denied it. I don't think she told Ricci that I had planned it, but she told him about the letter."

He answered lifelessly and then went back to staring off into space.

"You'll make quite a show at the trial," I said casually.

He looked up, and I saw by the expression in his eyes that I'd been right. That had been what he was thinking about.

"Blake," he said hoarsely, "I've never done anything against you. What is it you want? Do you want to get me or the Syndicate?"

"I want to wipe out the whole dirty mess," I said. "You, too. That's not personal, you understand. But for too long you've been the man everyone looked up to, while the whole time you were helping to turn kids into drug addicts and getting rich in the process. I wouldn't turn you loose, if that's what you're getting at."

"I'll make a bargain with you, Blake," he said. His eyes were pleading with me.

"What kind of bargain?" I asked.

He took a deep breath. "I have a lot of records," he said, "covering the last fifteen years. Everything I took part in. There's plenty of evidence—on everybody, even Frankie Carmel. Enough to send them all up. Every dirty detail—oh, yes, I knew they were dirty, a long time ago, I guess, but it was already too late to back out. There are plenty of names, including some that will come as a surprise. And there's something else that will interest you, Blake."

"What?"

"That first night you were in town," he said, "I was suspicious when Valda left my party early. I followed her. I saw her go into your hotel and I guessed what she was doing there. That night I followed you out to the cabin. I—I saw Ricci Menotti kill her. I made an affidavit on it and it's among the other papers. I'm willing to turn them all over to you."

"What do you want in return?" I asked.

His gaze dropped to the floor. "That gun," he said, so softly I could hardly hear him. "With just one bullet in it."

I looked at him thoughtfully. In a way I felt sorry for him. I knew what would happen if he went on trial. It would be a field day. To hell with it, I thought. There are enough circuses in the country. Let them miss one.

"How do I get the papers?" I asked.

He looked up and his eyes thanked me. He reached in his pocket and came out with a key, which he held out to me. "A safe deposit box," he said, "in the Third National Bank. It's not registered in any name. The key is all that's needed. Because of my position, I was able to arrange it that way."

I took the key. Then I bent down and picked up his gun. I broke it open and removed all the shells except one. I closed it and held it out to him. He took it from me and I turned and walked out through the front door. I sat down on the porch and lit a cigarette.

There was a single shot from inside the cabin.

CHAPTER 8

Harry Manners was the first one to arrive. The gasoline-driven pump was on a trailer hooked behind his car. I held the gun on him and we both waited. Shortly after that the cops arrived. All kinds. State cops, county cops, city cops. They swarmed all over the place. They pumped the water out of the well and found the narcotics. They examined the bodies in the living room. They raised some hell about the one who had committed suicide, but there wasn't anything they could do about it.

When they were through there, I went into town with a bunch of the cops. We went to the Third National Bank and used the key I had. Everything was there, just like he'd said it was. There was so much the cops were starting to drool. Several of them scattered in different directions to call Reno and Washington.

I was left with a state police captain and the city chief of police. They'd seen the affidavit Big Joe had left and they'd heard my story at least four times. They finally decided I didn't have to stick around. They agreed that everything would be dropped, but they thought I ought to stay in Las Vegas for a few days, just as a formality. I agreed with everything they said without really listening.

They let me go. They even let me pick up the Cadillac which was parked over at the police station. I drove it back to the rental place and paid my bill. Then I walked to the hotel and went up to my room.

There was still some Canadian Club left in the bottle. I took a drink, but it didn't lift me like it usually did. I got up and wandered around the room.

On the dresser there was a small white card with a doctor's name on it, and the hotel's address. I remembered he was the one who'd looked me over the night I was beaten. My side hurt, so I called him. He wasn't busy and he said he'd come right up.

He was there in five minutes. He looked at my side and clucked like a chicken. He sponged it off with something that hurt like hell, then he painted it and put a bandage over it. After that, he gave me a shot of penicillin.

"That looked like a bullet wound," he said as he packed his things.

"Yeah," I said.

"I—I'll have to make a report on it," he said.

"Sure," I said. "Go ahead."

He looked relieved. "Shall I send the bill to Senator Hennessey?" he asked.

I stared at him a minute and then remembered that Big Joe had told the doctor to send the bill to him before. "No," I said. "I'm afraid Senator Hennessey won't be able to pay it. How much do I owe you?"

"Five dollars."

I took five silver dollars from the dresser and gave them to him.

"I—" he began.

"Goodbye, Doc," I said firmly. He left.

I walked around the room some more. Then I picked up the phone and asked the operator to get me the airport. When they answered, I asked about planes to Washington. There was one leaving in an hour. There were seats available and they would hold a reservation for thirty minutes. I hung up.

Then I made up my mind. I knew I should stay in Las Vegas. The cops wouldn't like it if I left. But they knew where to find me. Jay Crowley wouldn't like it either if I left without seeing him, and I felt I owed him something for having suspected him. Julie Lawrence was probably waiting somewhere, too.

And then there was Carla. I owed her a lot, too. And in a way, I wanted to see her. But I didn't know where she lived. And she'd been fired from the studio.

There were a lot of things I should do, but there was only one thing I wanted to do. That was get out of Las Vegas. Some day I'd feel differently about it, but right now I didn't like the place. Too many things had happened in four days—there were too many memories. I felt used. Maybe I was just sorry for myself.

To hell with all of it, I thought. I threw my clothes into my suitcase. My own gun was still over in the police station somewhere. The one I had was probably hot, but I tossed it into the suitcase anyway. When I had finished packing, I called downstairs for a bellhop.

When the boy came I told him the rest of the silver dollars on the dresser were for him. He grinned with delight as he picked up my suitcase. As we were going out the door, the phone began ringing. I let it ring.

The taxi got me to the airport in time to pick up the reservation. As soon as the plane was ready I went out and climbed aboard. I sat down and tilted my seat back. I closed my eyes and tried to erase all the pictures that kept flashing across my mind.

They were warming up the motors when I felt someone sit down beside me. I didn't open my eyes to look. I didn't feel like company.

The motors roared louder and I could feel the plane rolling along the runway. When it got completely smooth, I knew we were in the air.

"Hello, Buster."

I opened my eyes. It was Carla. She was sitting beside me, her gamin face tilted toward me. I couldn't decide whether I was glad to see her or not.

"Carla Blane, Girl Photographer," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Going on to my new job," she said.

"New job?"

"Sure. Don't tell me you've forgotten."

"Forgotten what?" I said. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Men," she said with a grin. "You said I worked for you. So where you go, I go. You said it in front of witnesses."

I remembered. I'd told the cops that night when they were going to take her along that she worked for me and that was why she was in my room. "No witnesses," I said. "They're all dead."

"There was a little cop with them," she said. "I think he's alive. I've got a witness."

The little cop. The one who hadn't liked what they were doing and who had visited me in my jail cell. He'd been about to go off to the other end of town until things were cleared up. Frankie and Weeper had gone off fishing. Everybody had gone off, leaving it up to me. I pushed them out of my mind and looked at her.

"Maybe I can give you a job at that," I said. "I could use somebody around the place."

"That's me," she said. "Carla Blane, Girl Friday."

"What are you on the other days?" I asked. I looked at her again. "You're pretty," I said. I was surprised. It seemed to just come to me.

"I thought you might notice it," she said, "when you weren't being blinded by brighter colors."

"Remind me to do something about it," I said. I was beginning to feel sleepy. I started to put my head back and then I had a thought. I looked at her again. "You sure your hair is naturally black?"

She grinned at me. "Positive," she said. "Guaranteed to stand up against any test."

"Just wanted to be sure," I said. "I've been suckered by too many blondes recently."

I went to sleep, with my head on her shoulder.

THE END

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TOO MANY MEMORIES

Seeing Valda in all her lush, live beauty always disturbed me. Seeing her dead was even worse. It brought back too many memories of how wonderful she'd been in my arms.

Whoever had done this would answer to me. I'd be the jury — and the hangman. Then my glance picked up the first lead, there on the rug. It was the gun that killed Valda, a .38 just like mine. I stared at it. It *was* mine . . .

And where did I go from here?

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